

CHRISTIAN ORIENT

A JOURNAL OF EASTERN CHURCHES FOR CREATIVE THEOLOGICAL THINKING

MARCH 2010

VOL. XXXI NO. 1



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ECCLESIOLOGY

REFERENCES IN THE WRITINGS OF ST. EPHREM
TO THE INDIAN MISSION OF ST. THOMAS

Dr. James Puliurumpil

ST. EPHREM'S APPROACH TO GOD AND THE DIVINE REALITIES

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SYMBOLICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF
BAPTISMAL THEOLOGY

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Editorial

In ancient times there were three Christian worlds: Latin, Greek and Syriac. They can be better called the Latin West, the Greek East and the Syriac Orient. Or we can say in the early centuries of the Christian era the Church had a threefold Christian heritage or tradition. Each of these three traditions has something special to contribute to the Christian tradition as a whole. Here our concern is the third one since this third one is often forgotten or neglected by many writers even of the modern period. The Syriac Orient or the Christian tradition of the Aramaic-speaking populace of the eastern Roman Empire and of the Persian empire has a number of distinctive features. The main characteristic feature is the poetic style of expression of its theology. Poems are the best vehicle for the expression of its spirituality, liturgy, history and theology. Poetry thus becomes the ideal medium of meditation on the mysteries of the Incarnation. The Syriac tradition of poetry on the theme of the place of Mary in the Salvation History is very rich. St. Ephrem has to his credit a number of hymns on St. Thomas the apostle as well.

The frequent wars waged between the Roman Empire and the powers ruling east of the Euphrates, whether Persian or Parthian, cut off for long periods communication between Europe and Western Asia. Thus the political situation of these empires hindered

any interaction between the churches in those empires. The western church records, therefore, regarding the preaching of the apostles or their disciples and the foundation of the churches outside the Roman Empire, give very less information regarding them. On the other hand, regarding the apostles those worked within the boundaries of the Roman Empire, a good deal of history found their way down to us. The Mongolian and Mohammedan havoc have destroyed a good deal of evidences of many centuries. We can only hope to recover them by careful research among the Syriac records still existing in the far eastern churches and monasteries, whether they are the writings of the Fathers or prayers used in the different liturgies. Here comes the role of St. Ephrem, the great man of the Syriac world and a prolific writer of the ancient period. He writes a lot on the activities of the apostles, especially St. Thomas, the apostle of India. Whatever has he written on St. Thomas, is through poetry. *Carmina Nisibena*, and 5 other hymns (*Madrashas*) deal with St. Thomas. In the first article we see the references of Ephrem on St. Thomas in his many hymns. There is a marvelous amount of things written on him by Ephrem. The author goes through the different hymns one by one and studies the mind of Ephrem behind the lines. Ephrem is eloquent in his writings on the life and death of St. Thomas in India and about his Relics in Edessa.

The second article too is on St. Ephrem. Dr. Sebastian Vethanathu, a scholar on St. Ephrem, writes on 'St. Ephrem's Approach to God and the Divine Realities'. Human beings can attain experiential knowledge of God through divine revelation. God's progressive revelation in nature, Scripture and in the Incarnate Son aims human beings' participation in the divine knowledge. For Ephrem the basic human approach to God is not one of pure reason, but of faith combined with reason in the spirit of discernment. Ephrem emphasizes the transcendent and the immanent dimensions in his approach to God and the divine realities. According to him the hidden nature of the revealed things reveals the depth of the hiddenness of the one who is being revealed. Ephrem is very conscious of the sacramental character of the word. Everything in the world carries God's image. Through divine grace and faith God fills the human heart with his presence. It is the responsibility of each one to respond to this divine presence positively through an attitude of prayer and praise.

The third article is on the 'Symbolical Significance of Baptismal Theology'. In liturgy, everything done under the mediation of symbols brings forth the real sense of celebration as heaven on earth. Liturgical symbols are the visible signs of invisible

realities, which relate the human life to the divine life. They are the divine interventions of God on earth to manifest the mysterious relationship between God and man. They create heaven on earth and elevate earth to heaven. Christ used symbols to make Himself known to the people. His own incarnation was the very first and the greatest symbol ever employed in history for the divine manifestation of making God visible to humanity. He instituted Eucharist under the symbol of bread and wine, and instituted other sacraments as the symbolic rivulets of His divine graces conferred in different occasions of life. As a human need symbols are the God given assistance to humanity for grasping the invisible divine realities on earth. Baptismal symbols are very rich in theology. The ways and means of administering baptism received their symbolical significance through centuries. The types and methods of baptism manifest the symbolical relevance of Christian becoming of one with Christ as the members of the Church. Here the author, Dr. Moolan gives the different types and methods of baptism and the symbolical meaning of any act in the baptismal ceremony. The types and meaning of baptismal font and the need of internal purity is well described. Towards the end we find the gradual evolution of the symbolical and theological significance of baptism in salvation history.



References in the Writings of St. Ephrem to the Indian Mission of St. Thomas

Dr. James Puliurumpil

The frequent wars waged between the Roman Empire and the powers ruling east of the Euphrates, whether Persian or Parthian, cut off for long periods communication between Europe and Western Asia. Thus the political situation of these empires hindered any interaction between the churches in those empires. The western church records, therefore, regarding the preaching of the apostles or their disciples and the foundation of the churches outside the Roman empire give very less information regarding them. On the other hand, regarding the apostles those worked within the boundaries of the Roman Empire, a good deal of history found their way down to us. The Mongolian and Mohammedan havoc have destroyed a good deal of evidences of many centuries.¹ We can only hope to recover them by careful research among the Syriac records still existing in the far eastern churches and monasteries, whether they are the writings of the Fathers or prayers used in the different liturgies.

St. Ephrem

The earliest author of the Eastern Church St. Ephrem, the Great Doctor of the Syrian Church, was born in Nisibis. He had his religious education under Mar Jacob of Nisibis (303-338). In 326 he was appointed the head of the Theological Faculty of Nisibis. He worked under the successors of Mar Jacob such as Mar Babovai (338-350) Mar Volages (350-361) and Mar Abraham (361-). In 338, 346 and 350 the Persian king Sapor II and in 363 Romans attacked Nisibis. In 363 when this town was surrendered to King Sapor by the Roman Emperor Jovian Ephrem left the town and retired to Edessa, a frontier town of the empire together with many other Christians. During this time Ephrem came to the help of the fellow Christians which destroyed his health and in 373 on June 9 Ephrem died.²

Besides the Latin West and Greek East there is also a third world the Syriac Orient

¹ A.E. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas* (London 1905) 18. An event is narrated in this book to show the hostile attitude of one country towards the other. In 139 A.D. Achadabues and Kam-Jesu, were, at the dying request of Jacob, the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, sent to Antioch in order that one of the two might be chosen and appointed his successor. The ecclesiastical usage then prevailing required that the person elected to the see should require consecration at the hands of the bishop of Antioch. On their arrival at Antioch, the two candidates were denounced as Persian spies to the authorities. Both were seized, but Achadabues escaped to Jerusalem, while his companion Kam-Jesu and his host were executed as spies by the prefect of the city. This sad event naturally led to a change of the ecclesiastical rule in the case of the see of Selucia-Ctesiphon. Medlycott narrates this event basing on Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis* vol. II (Rome 1728) 396.

² G. Chediath, *Mar Ephrem – Paschal Hymns* (OIRSI Kottayam 2009) 6.

which consists of the Aramaic speaking populace of the Eastern Roman Empire and of the Persian Empire. One of the most distinctive features of the Syriac Christian tradition is its poetic style to express the theological and related items. Not prose, but poetry is used as the vehicle for the expression of spirituality, liturgy or theology. Through poetry deep insights are better expressed. Poetry becomes the ideal medium for meditation on the mysteries of Incarnation.³ Ephrem, the leader of the Syriac Orient too uses poetry in abundance as the medium of expressing his theological insights. His hymns on the Church, Virgin Mary, Nativity, Crucifixion, Resurrection etc are the important ones. St. Ephrem in many of his writings refers to the Indian mission of St. Thomas. In his many hymns we find St. Ephrem praising the Apostle Thomas and this testifies to the fact India is the field of his evangelization, death and burial. In particular he articulates the contemporary living tradition in Edessa on the relics of the Apostle and on his mission in India.⁴

Carmina Nisibena

In the *Carmina Nisibena* No. 42 Ephrem sings of the transfer of the relics of the Apostle from India to Edessa. This hymn consists of ten strophes and is composed in form not unlike that of Greek and Latin odes,

with a refrain to be sung after each strophe. Ephrem composed most of his hymns that they should be sung at the public services of the Church. Bickell remarks:

These refrains which always contain a prayer, or a doxology, were undoubtedly sung by the people in chorus, while the hymn was sung as a solo by a cleric. This style of singing took its origin in the Syrian church, and Ephrem composed his hymns in order to prevent the people continuing any longer tossing those tainted with Gnostic errors composed by Bardaisan and his son Harmonius.⁵

There is a special background of the origin of the singing of St. Ephrem's hymns. He had noticed that the people were singing the hymns composed by Harmonius, the son of Bardaisan and he feared that attracted by the melody of these hymns they would gradually imbibe the errors contained in these hymns. St. Ephrem, therefore, started to compose poems in his mother tongue and in the rhythm of Harmonius. Since Ephrem's hymns were very beautiful eventually his hymns became very popular.⁶

The 42nd hymn of the *Carmina Nisibena* which is composed of 10 stanzas is a complaint on the part of the devil about his defeat in the face of the work of redemption

³ S. Brock, *Bride of Light- Hymns on Mary from the Syriac Churches* (Kottayam 1994) 1.

⁴ P. Yousif, "The Apostle Thomas in the Witness of St. Ephrem of Nisibis" in Charles Payngot, ed. *Homage to Mar Cariattil, Pioneer Malabar Ecumenist* (Rome 1987) 79.

⁵ G. Bickell, *S. Ephraemi Syri, Carmina Nisibena*, (Leipzig 1866) 33. The collection of hymns edited by Bickell is from British Museum Add. MS. 14572, which consists of 117 folios.

⁶ Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* Lib. III, cap. Xvi gives the details of the same. There we read that St. Ephrem could successfully refute the writings of the heretics with his hymns which were adept with orthodox theological doctrines.

realized by Jesus and continued by his apostles. The first four stanzas deal with Thomas and the rest with the other apostles. The first stanza speaks of Thomas in India and of his relics in Edessa. Martyred in India, Thomas is still living there and in Edessa. This presence is indicated by the favours and miracles worked through him; but the power is that of Christ, hidden in the bones.⁷

The **first stanza** reads as:

The evil one wailed: where now
Is there a place for me to flee from
the righteous?
I stirred up Death to slay the Apostles
That I might be safe from their blows.
By their deaths now more exceedingly
am I cruelly beaten.
The apostle whom I slew in India is
before me in Edessa;
He is here wholly and also there.
I went there; there was he;
Here and there I have found him and
been grieved.
Blessed be the might that dwells in the
hallowed bones.⁸

The **second stanza** of the 42nd hymn of *Carmina Nisibena* speaks about the translation of the bones of St. Thomas to Edessa from India.

The merchant brought the bones: nay,
rather!
They brought him.
Lo, the mutual gain!
What profit where they to me
While theirs was the mutual gain
Both brought me loss.
Who will show me the casket of
Iscaiot,
Whence courage I derived?
But the casket of Thomas is slaying
me,
For a hidden power there residing
tortures me.⁹

Here we read that the relics was brought to Edessa by a Christian merchant. The removal of the Relics of Thomas from India¹⁰ to Edessa was done by a merchant is asserted not only in *Carmina Nisibena* but in a number of other hymns. Ephrem writes that the merchant bought the relics spending a

⁷ P. Yousif, "The Apostle Thomas In the Witness of St. Ephrem of Nisibis" in Charles Payngot, ed. *Homage to Mar Cariattil, Pioneer Malabar Ecumenist* (Rome 1987) 79.

⁸ The English translation is that of J.T. Strasfield Stopford. The verses are arranged according to the Syriac edition of E.Beck with a slight correction. See P. Yousif, "The Apostle Thomas In the Witness of St. Ephrem of Nisibis" in Charles Payngot, ed. *Homage to Mar Cariattil, Pioneer Malabar Ecumenist* (Rome 1987) 79.

⁹ The translation is as seen in A.E. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas* (London 1905) 23.

¹⁰ There are some who doubt whether the India mentioned by Ephrem is the present day India. This doubt is made clear by Beck in his German translation of the *Carmina Nisibena* writing that 'Satan klagt ueber die macht der Reliquien des Apostels Thomas, die ein Kaufmann aus Indien nach Edessa gebracht hat'. E. Beck, *Carmina Nisibena*, Syriac Text and German translation in CSCO I, Louvain 1963) 28. From this it is very clear that Ephrem meant the same India.

good deal of money and brought them in a bag, an action quite different from that of Judas. The one of Judas contained the demon of greed, the other instead divine favours, which was a torture for the devil. Ephrem does not give the name of this merchant, but it is found in the Chaldean Martyrology preserved by the Nestorians. In this Martyrology a section is given for the 'Kalendar, Fasts, Feasts and Sundays of the East Syrian Christians. In the first section of the Kalendar we read : 'July 3 – St. Thomas, who was pierced with a lance in India. His body is at Urhai (Edessa), having been brought there by the merchant Khabin. A great festival'.¹¹ There is also mention of the removal of the relics of Apostle Thomas from India to Edessa by Solomo (Solomon), bishop of Bassorah in 1222. He writes: Thomas ... because he baptized the daughter of the king of the Indians, he (the king) stabbed him with a spear and he died. Habban, the merchant, brought his body and laid it in Edessa'.¹² Habban, the trade commissioner or the messenger of Gundaphar in the Acts of Thomas, is wrongly introduced in place of Khabin. The similarity in sound of both these names may have induced the translator to make a substitution of Khabin with Habban as we give more

weight to the reading given by the Martyrology.¹³

The **third stanza** is as the following:

Moses the chosen carried the bones
(of Joseph)

In faith as for gain.

And if a great prophet believed

That there is benefit in bones,

The merchant did very well to believe

And did well to call himself merchant.

The merchant made gain and waxed
great and reigned.

His storehouse has made me very
poor.:

His storehouse has been opened in
Edessa

and has enriched the great city with
benefit.¹⁴

Ephrem, according to his typological mind, finds a parallel in the O. T. that justifies the practice of the Church venerating the relics. He compares the bones of Thomas to those of the patriarch Joseph, which Moses brought with veneration from Egypt and which accompanied the people of God in their journey to the promised land.¹⁵ Here the

¹¹ A.J. Maclean, *The Catholicos of the East and His People* (London 1892). The MS used by Maclean is dated 1443. A.D., but it is obviously a copy of an ancient Calendar. According to this Calendar the feasts of St. Thomas (July 3), St. George (April 24) and St. Cyriac (Quriaqus) (July 15) are the great feasts. These Three are greatly venerated among the Syrians and their names are very commonly borne by the Christians.

¹² *The Book of the Bee*, edited with English translation by E.A. Wallis (Clarendon Press 1886) part ii, vol. I of Semitic Series of *Anecdota Oxoniensia*. 105.

¹³ A.E. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas* (London 1905) 24.

¹⁴ Charles Payngot, ed. *Homage to Mar Cariattil, Pioneer Malabar Ecumenist* (Rome 1987) 80-81.

¹⁵ Regarding the removal of the bones of Joseph see Gen. 1: 24,25; Exo. 13: 19; Josh. 24: 32, referred to in Acts. 7:16.

authority of Moses is brought forward in support of the practice of the Church in venerating the remains of martyrs and saints. His words disclose the early practice and belief of the Syrian Church. Ephrem testifies that the relics are profitable in faith and venerated in the Church not for superstitious reasons. So the merchant, as is narrated in the second stanza, who brought them made the best use of his money. The graces granted by the relics of Thomas are riches for the Church of Edessa and impoverishment for the kingdom of devils.

The **fourth stanza** reads thus:

At this storehouse of treasure I was amazed,

For small was its treasure at first:

And though no man took from it,

Poor was the spring of its wealth.

But when the multitudes have come round it,

And plundered it and carried off its riches,

According as it is plundered,

So much the more does its wealth increase.

For a pent-up spring if one seeks it out

When deeply pierced it flows forth mighty and abounds.¹⁶

Here Ephrem compares the relics to a spring or a source of water which marvelously grows in as much as you drink from it.¹⁷ At the beginning the spring was poor, but the faith of the faithful, like a good thief, plundered it by their prayers and petitions and it became bigger and bigger. And the result was marvelous abundance of divine grace and favours.

From the Nisibene Hymn 42 of St. Ephrem certain historical facts are found to be certain. They are

1. St. Thomas suffered martyrdom in India (stanza 1)
2. His body was buried in India (stanza 1)
3. His bones were thence removed by a merchant to the city of Edessa (stanza 2-3)
4. His power and influence were felt in both places (stanza 1-2)

In three more Hymns we find St. Ephrem praising St. Thomas and India. These Hymns are not given special titles. Therefore they are treated as *Madrasha* (Hymn) I, *Madrasha* II and *Madrasha* III.

Madrasha I

Madrasha I or Hymn (No. I) of St. Ephrem, which contains seventeen strophes or stanzas also mention Thomas, the apostle

¹⁶ The English translation is that of J.T. Strasfield Stopford. The verses are arranged according to the Syriac edition of E.Beck with a slight correction. See P. Yousif, "The Apostle Thomas In the Witness of St. Ephrem of Nisibis" in Charles Payngot, ed. *Homage to Mar Cariattil, Pioneer Malabar Ecumenist* (Rome 1987) 81.

¹⁷ Ephrem often compares the Word of God to an inexhaustible spring.

of India, in many places. Thomas is very clearly mentioned in the XI till XVII stanzas.¹⁸

Stanza XI

Blessed are thou, Thomas, the Twin, in thy deeds! Twin is thy spiritual power, nor one thy power, nor one thy name:

But many and signal are they; renowned is thy name among the apostles.

From thy lowly state thee I haste to sing.

Stanza XII

Blessed art thou, O Light, like the lamp, the sun amidst darkness hath placed; the earth darkened with sacrifices' fumes to illuminate.

A Land of people dark fell to thy lot that these in white robes thou shouldest clothe and cleanse by baptism: a tainted land Thomas has purified.

Stanza XIII

Blessed art thou, like unto the solar ray from the great orb, thy grateful dawn India's painful darkness doth dispel.

Thou the great lamp, one among the Twelve, with oil from the Cross replenished, India's dark night floodest with light.

Stanza XIV

Blessed art thou whom the Great King hath sent, that India to his One Begotten thou

shouldest espouse; above snow and linen white, thou the dark bride didst make fair.

Blessed art thou, who the unkempt hast adorned, that having become beautiful and radiant, to her Spouse she might advance.

Stanza XV

Blessed art thou, who hast faith in the bride, whom from heathenism, from demon's errors, and from enslavement to sacrifices thou didst rescue.

Her with saving bath thou cleanest, the sunburnt thou hast made fair, the Cross of Light her darkened shades effacing.

Stanza XVI

Blessed art thou, O merchant who broughtest where so greatly it was needed; thou the wise man, who to secure the great pearl, of the riches all else thou givest.

The finder it enriches and ennobles: indeed thou art the merchant who the world endowest.

Stanza XVII

Blessed art thou, O Thrice-Blessed City! That hast acquired this pearl, none greater doth India yield:

Blessed art thou, worthy to possess the priceless gem! Praise to thee, O Gracious Son, Who thus thy adorers dost enrich.¹⁹

¹⁸ See the text in Lamy, *S. Ephraemi Syri Hymni Sermones*, vol. IV (Louvain 1902) pp. 694 f. Msgr. Lamy, a Syriac scholar of the University of Louvain devoted ten years for the publication of the same. The MS for the above hymn he depends on is taken from *British Museum Add. MS. 17141*, folio 85., which is of the eighth or ninth century. *The Breviary According to the Rite of the Church of Antioch of the Syrians* (Mosul 1886-1889) also contains 1,2,6 & 7 strophes of this hymn.

¹⁹ The translation of these stanzas are according to A.E. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas* (London 1905) 26-27.

In this Madrasa I, we can find the following facts related to history.²⁰ They are:

1. Thomas was a lamp placed in darkness to illuminate the earth filled with the smoke of false sacrifices (stanza XII)

2. It was to a land of dark people he was destined, to clothe them by baptism in white robes and to purify the tainted land (stanza XII)

3. His grateful dawn dispelled India's painful darkness (stanza XIII)

4. He, one of the Twelve, like a great lamp with oil from the Cross replenished, flooded India's dark night with light (XIII)

5. It was his mission to espouse India to the One Begotten (stanza XIV)

6. He had faith in the Bride, so he rescued her from demon's errors; he made the sunburnt fair with light from the Cross (stanza XV)

7. The merchant is blessed for having brought so great a treasure to a place where it was greatly needed (stanza XVI)

8. Edessa thus became the blessed city by possessing the greatest pearl India could yield (stanza XVII)

Madrasa II

Madrasa II consists of eight stanzas, except the IV and V, where also we read about St. Thomas.²¹

In the first stanza we find that Thomas attains great honour due to the translation of his bones from India to Edessa by a merchant. A Pontiff assigns a feast in his honour and a king erects a shrine to his memory.

The first stanza is as the following:

Thomas whence thy lineage,
So illustrious thou shouldest become?
A merchant thy bones conveys;
A Pontiff assigns thee a feast;
A King a shrine erects.²²

Here there is reference to the institution of the feast of St. Thomas on July 3 in the Church of Edessa. From Edessa it spread over the whole Christian world. This feast is not in remembrance of the martyrdom but that of the translation of the Relics of St. Thomas to Edessa. According to the *Chronicon Edessenum* it was on August 22, 394 A.D. was the translation of his relics to Edessa from Mylapore. Therefore for the Syrian Churches, this day is considered the arrival of the 'Depositum' of the Apostle's Bones in the city of Edessa. In a later period, during the time of Bishop Cyrus, the relics were removed from there to a new church erected in honour of St. Thomas.

As the last line of the stanza we read 'a king erects a shrine'. This is a reference to the last part of *Acts of Thomas*, where we find King Mazdai opens the grave of the Apostle,

²⁰ A.E. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas* (London 1905) 32.

²¹ This hymn is also given in the *Breviary according to the Rite of the Church of Antioch of the Syrians* (vol. VI. p. 635). See the text in Lamy, *S. Ephraemi Syri Hymni Sermones*, vol. IV (Louvain 1902), p. 704.

²² For the translation of the text see A.E. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas* (London 1905) 27-29.

and not finding his bones, takes some of the dust and applies it to his son and thus delivers him from the devil's possessions. According to St. Ephrem, Mazdai might be the king who built a church over the original tomb of the Apostle in Mylapore.²³

In the second stanza it is clear that a merchant brings the bones of Thomas to Edessa. The whole Church considers it as a very precious gift which can be compared to none.

The **second stanza** reads as:

The bones the merchant hath brought,
Over them an outward watch he kept,
They from within guard over him keep.
Since on diverse trades he embarked
Nothing so priceless did he acquire.

The **third stanza** testifies to the contact between the churches of Malabar and Edessa. Of all the riches of the land the sacred bones of the apostle was the most precious one. The third stanza is as the following:

In his several journeys to India,
And thence on his returns,
All riches, which there he found,
Dirt in his eyes he did repute
When to thy sacred bones compared.

In the **sixth stanza** St. Ephrem says that Thomas works miracles both in India and in Edessa. The merchants who visited Indian shrine brought back reports of the miracles

taking place there, and also the favours receiving.²⁴ He also mentions the celebration of his festival in all the churches. It reads as:

Neither promised nor hoped for,
One thing more did he (the creator)
give.
Lo, in India thy wonders,
In our land thy triumph,
Everywhere thy festival.

In the **seventh stanza** too Ephrem writes about the wonders taking place in the name of the apostle. During his (apostle's) life time he could work wonders, with great fatigue, only in one region, but now he could do it everywhere also without any labour. The stanza reads thus:

Wonders during life thou performest,
These, after death, thou still continuest:
Under great bodily fatigue
In one region only didst thou heal.
Now, everywhere, without labour
thou dost cure.

In the **eighth stanza** we find that the custom, from the apostolic times, to heal the sick with the sign of the Cross and with the blessed oil, as ordered by the Lord, is also practiced in Edessan Church. This stanza reads as the following:

As thou wast taught (by the Lord),
With the sign of the Cross and oil
thou didst heal;

²³ A.E. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas* (London 1905) 27-28.

²⁴ Marco Polo and such other foreign visitors too bear witness to similar instances in later periods.

But now, without speech, demons
thou expellest;
Without speech human ills thou curest;
Without prayer the dead do arise.

Madrasha III

In three stanzas of the Hymn No. III (Madrasha III) of St. Ephrem too we find references to St. Thomas.²⁵

This hymn has all together six stanzas.

In the **first stanza** we find that Thomas is destined to baptize peoples perverse and steeped in darkness, and that in the land of India. The stanza reads as the following:

The One Begotten has apostles chose,
Among them, Thomas, whom he sent
To baptize peoples perverse, in
darkness steeped.
A dark night then India's land
enveloped.
Like the sun's ray Thomas did dart
forth;
There he dawned, and her illumined.

In the second stanza we read that Thomas, the Lord's apostle, has the singular power of designing an edifice on earth and erecting it on heaven. Here St. Ephrem refers to a vision as narrated in the Acts. There we find the vision of a beautiful building in heaven which the apostle had erected by his preaching and good works in India.²⁶ In the Acts the building to be erected is called palace, while Ephrem speaks of a dwelling. According to

Ephrem, when Thomas saw a palace in heaven in a dream, he was asked by the king to build him a mansion for his dwelling. The second stanza reads as the following:

What dweller on earth was ever seen,
But Thomas, the Lord's Apostle,
On earth designing and a dwelling in
Heaven erecting
Or on earth who so wise was found
Here of his genius essaying
What in Heaven a crowning secures?

Thomas is very much praised and appreciated by his followers. The result of his apostolate is attested by his martyred followers. His work attests his teaching; his miracles proclaim him living in heaven. The Indians are converted by the deeds they have witnessed. Who can then possibly doubt the truth of his relics? The stanza reads as:

The client of Thomas needs not men
his praises to sing;
Great is the crowd of his martyred
followers.
Lo, his Bones, his Passion, his Work
proclaim;
His Miracles, him yet alive assert;
His Deeds the rough Indian convinced
Who dares doubt the truth of his
Relics?

These words of Ephrem tell us clearly that the martyrdom of St. Thomas happened in India (in Mylapore). The miracles happening

²⁵ Lamy, *S. Ephraemi Syri Hymni Sermones*, vol. IV (Louvain 1902), p. 706.

²⁶ W. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (London 1871), p. 162.

there are the proofs for the same. The preceding reference of Thomas 'building a palace' for the king in the Heaven is, therefore, real for Ephrem as it was the real mission of St. Thomas, as well as of all other apostles. That is the reason why Ephrem exclaims 'who dares doubt the truth of his Relics'.

Hymni Dispersi ²⁷V, VI and VII also contain some references to St. Thomas. They are the following:

In **Hymn V**, stanza 1 we read:²⁸

Your (of Thomas) hand had touched the sweet spring which made flow life for the world.

Stanza 2 : ... to touch the side of the Son of God.

Stanza 3:

Happy are you, o rich in faith
Who did not believe your fellow
disciples;
Not that you considered them as liars,
But because your love was burning
To that by the touch of hand
You may approach the Treasure.

Stanza 4 too gives the same idea.

Stanza 5: Happy are you because your faith became

Like a mirror for the resurrection of mankind;

And from it the nation learned
That the body will rise on the day or resurrection.

Stanza 9: You loved, touched, held and were confirmed,
And you preached among the nations.

Stanzas 12-17 refers to India and the story of the merchant.

Hymn VI, stanzas 1 to 8 make references to Thomas.

Hymn VII, stanzas 1&2 are on Thomas

Stanza 3: Happy are you, Thomas the Apostle

With a beautiful face, to whom was betrothed

An ugly and dreadful bride,

Whose colour is black and conduct wicked.

By you she was illuminated, became beautiful and righteous

And gracious and with glorious deeds.

And behold the treasure of your victories has grown and

You changed the darkness into light.

Stanza 4: is a profession faith in the divinity of Christ.

Stanza 5: On Thomas' relics and his miracles in India.

²⁷ Some are of the opinion that these hymns do not seem to belong to Ephrem, but could come from an epremitic tradition. The themes here correspond to Ephrem's views on the encounter of Thomas who really touched Jesus.

²⁸ J. Lamy, *Sancti Epremi Syri Hymn et Sermons* vol. I (Mechlin 1882) 693-708. The translation is from Charles Payngot, ed. *Homage to Mar Cariattil, Pioneer Malabar Ecumenist* (Rome 1987) 81-85

Stanza 6: From you did the Church learn

The faith without doubt, and by you
were confirmed the nations

Which were in darkness from the true
Religion.

From you all those wandering learned
To walk on the way of faith:

Thanksgiving to your Lord
Who exalted your memory.

May your prayer be a rampart for us.

Here the faith of Thomas and faith of the Church are synonymous. Or the Church learns from the faith of Thomas who walks always on the way of faith. It is he who gives the nations faith and brings them from darkness to the true religion.

The *Memre for New Sunday* also gives references to Thomas. According to this text his behaviour was a kind of love for Jesus, which expresses itself by touching. Thomas is sad because the Lord appeared to the others and bestowed on them the joy to see Him and receive the Holy Spirit. Jesus responds to this love. The following are the verses referring to Thomas:²⁹

The Apostles say:

He showed us His wounds

And in them we have seen the place
of the nails

And He uncovered His side and
showed us

The place of the lance with which it
was pierced.

(Thomas) was sad because he did not
happen to see

Jesus as his colleagues did.

And his mind was doubting

Whether that was true or untrue

Thomas says to the Apostles:

It is true that our Lord has risen

And visited you as you say,

Why did He leave you and go away,

And did not remain so that we would
see Him?

Be aware! May be the wicked one
dared

To show you appearances

So that with them he may deceive you

And cheat you like children!

And when I see Him and recognize
Him,

I shall believe and worship Him.

I do not believe from words

Since deed is greater than word.

You saw His wounds from far

This is not enough for me.

Why does he repel me,

Since I made nothing ugly!

I loved Him and I do love Him,

²⁹ The text is given by Patros Yousif in Charles Payngot, ed. *Homage to Mar Cariattil, Pioneer Malabar Ecumenist* (Rome 1987) 83-85. He follows the text given in J. Lamy, *Sancti Epreni Syri Hymn et Sermons* vol. I (Mechlin 1882) col. 540- 562.

And he has afflicted me because He
did not wait for me.

Why did he not insufflate in me the
Spirit,

And gave not (her) to me as o you?
I shall not cease crying
Until my eyes see Him.

Jesus meets Thomas

And Jesus preceded Thomas before
he approached Him

And allowed to touch Him.

"Thomas, bring your hand

And touch the place of the lance

And stay not in the doubt

So to find yourself like an unbeliever.

The gift your friends received

You have it; do not be sad.

I insufflate in you the Holy Spirit

And by Her be directed

And immediately when he approached
as he had wanted,

And touched the wounds of the nails,

He believed and adored Him

Exclaiming to Him: "My Lord and
my God!"

The answer of Jesus:

And to Thomas Jesus answered

With these words full of peace:

"Now that you have seen me you
have believed

And that you touched me you know
me?

This is not so great

That a man, when he touches and
holds, believes.

This is not faith

But scrutiny and enquiry

If you believe now

And you did not believe unless you
touched me,

How could you believe in the Father

Whom you cannot see and palpate?

Very marvelous is the faith of Simon

Who, without seeing me, believed a
woman,

And he did not doubt in order to
investigate

Because when I came and he saw me,
he believed.

Why, Thomas, did you not believe

That I am the Son of God?

And if you believe, what is your
difficulty

That I do not act like God?

Though Ephrem does not give any
comment on the confession of Thomas, 'My
Lord and my God', he tries his best to show
that Thomas follows the way showed by
Jesus, who is 'The Way'. According to Ephrem
the aim of the apparition to Thomas was to
confirm the fact that Jesus rose from the
dead. Thomas' life and death in India and his
relics in Edessa are the important themes in
the writings of Ephrem on Thomas.



St. Ephrem's Approach to God and the Divine Realities

Dr. Sebastian Vethanath

Introduction

Though there are limits, human beings can attain experiential knowledge of God through divine revelation. God's progressive revelation in nature, scripture and in the incarnate Son aims human beings' participation in the divine knowledge. For Ephrem, the basic human approach to God is not one of pure reason, but of faith combined with reason in the spirit of discernment. If human beings are rightly guided by the principles of faith, reason, wonder and prayer, in their search for God, they certainly attain participation in the life of God through experiential knowledge of him.

1. God as Transcendent and Immanent

Ephrem emphasizes both the transcendent and the immanent dimensions in his approach to God and the divine realities. The unbridgeable distance and the great closeness of God are repeated themes in Ephrem¹. The far away God is very near in Christ and the nearby God is, in fact, far

away². The transcendent and immanent aspects of God are often referred to by the terms of 'hiddenness' (*kasyutā*) and 'revealedness' (*galyutā*). On the one hand Ephrem is intensely aware of the mysteriousness and inaccessibility of the divine realm. God is hidden and mysterious; he is beyond space, time and human accessibility³. On this point, as A. de Halleux remarks, Ephrem might have been influenced slightly or greatly by the Neoplatonic sense of the divine transcendence. On the other hand Ephrem depicts the immanent aspect of God. He is not hidden within the mysterious realm. The hidden One is manifested in revelation. Ephrem expresses these hidden and manifest aspects of God as follows:

He shadowed forth things upon things which are visible, that He might shew the things which are not seen by the things which are seen: He imprinted His mysteries upon trees, that He might explain the things which are not comprehended by the things which are comprehended⁴.

¹ Cf. *Sermons on Faith* II: 709-713.

² Cf. *Hymns on Virginity* 36: 9.

³ Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 11: 11; 27: 3; 69: 3; *Hymns on Virginity* 52: 4; *Hymns on Church* 27: 6.

⁴ *Hymns on Faith* 76: 11-13.

God has inscribed the invisible and incomprehensible hidden mysteries (*râḫâ*) on the visible and comprehensible realities. The divine content of *râḫâ* is hidden, though *râḫâ* as such are not hidden. In other words, *kasyutâ* is the characteristic of mystery (*râḫâ*) both in the sense of symbols, whether in scripture or in nature, and in the sense of sacraments. God is hidden, except in so far as he allows himself to be revealed. The human experience of God's hiddenness is possible only through God's various instances of self-revelation. At the same time through the individual self-manifestation of God one cannot have a full knowledge of God's hiddenness, because many of the visible things to some extent are in fact incomprehensible. When one attempts to understand the manifested things they become almost like hidden things. Even if the nature of the manifested things proves to be rudimentary, one should be more careful about the things which are hidden by nature⁵. Ephrem advises:

You do not arrive at 'the things manifest'; how can you understand 'the Hidden One'? And why should we weary ourselves to narrate the creatures that are incomprehensible? For behold, at the scrutiny of 'things manifest' they become like 'hidden things'. And if 'manifest things' are also 'hidden' indeed how much more 'hidden', 'the

things hidden'? How much more 'hidden', the Hidden One in His 'hiddenness'?⁶

The hidden nature of the revealed things reveals the depth of the hiddenness of the One who is being revealed.

2. The Ontological Chasm between the Creator and Created Beings

The dynamic and paradoxical tension between the hidden and manifested dimensions of God is related to the ontological chasm (*pehtâ*) existing between the Creator and created beings. It (the chasm) separates the divine and human realms and makes humanity totally incapable of any approach to God. Ephrem asks: "What created thing can search into his Godhead, when there is a gulph between him and the Creator?"⁷. The sharp contrast between God and human beings points to this ontological chasm and it cannot be crossed from the side of creatures, because it is the natural consequence of creatureliness⁸. The created beings are incapable of saying anything about the divine nature. Those who are going beyond, in fact are not going anywhere beyond, they merely blaspheme God by trying to put the Creator on a par with the creature⁹.

By developing the concept of chasm Ephrem refutes the Neo-Arian rationalists who minimized the real distance between God

⁵ Cf. T. KOONAMMAKKAL, "The Self-Revealing God and Man in Ephrem", in *The Harp* 4 (1993), 241.

⁶ *Sermons on Faith* II: 355-356; 429-436.

⁷ *Hymns on Faith* 69: 11.

⁸ Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 30: 2.

⁹ Cf. E. G. MATHEWS and J. P. AMAR (trs.), *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works*, K. E. McVey (ed.), in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol.91, Washington 1994, 50.

and humanity. Ephrem might have depended on *Lk* 16,26 (the parable of the rich man and Lazarus) as a starting point in developing the concept of chasm¹⁰. The immediate context was his polemic against Manichaeism. He was aware of the use of this imagery in the traditional Manichean context. Ephrem opposed Mani's ideas about an abyss or chasm between two dramatically opposed realms being connected as if by a bridge so that particles of light could escape from the bondage of darkness¹¹.

3. Divine Revelation: The Bridge for Crossing the Chasm

How can the chasm between God and human beings be bridged? Since no created reality can cross this gap, there is only one way out: God's coming down to the human level. The chasm exists only on the human part. God can cross the chasm. Nothing at all would have been possible for human being, if God himself had not taken the initiative and crossed the chasm in order to reveal himself. If God does not set himself plainly forth to humanity, there is none among the creatures that could serve as an interpreter for him¹². God, out of love for humanity, crossed the chasm and revealed himself through symbols and types in nature and in scripture. Through these close

indications of symbols and types one can safely search and reach the transcendent God and can cross over the chasm between the divine and human realms.

Symbols can be considered as bridges or connecting links between God and human beings. They draw humanity near to God. In Ephrem's opinion, as S. P. Brock points out, the purpose of the divine revelation through symbols and names is to provide humanity with innumerable glimpses of the glorious divine reality¹³. They are the means of preparation for the incarnation of the Son of God, effecting the restoration of the whole of humanity to the paradisiacal state of life. They all aim at the divinization of the created world¹⁴. Since the Son is of the same essence as the Father, he is the only perfect Revealer of God (cf. *Mt* 11,27; *Jn* 17,6). He gives knowledge of God¹⁵ and fills the chasm between the Creator and creatures. Christ is the bridge to the Father. This is clear from the following prayer:

Jesus, Your glorious Name, your hidden bridge that carries over from death to life, at You have I arrived and stand still! In J [= *yod*]¹⁶ Your initial I am detained; be a bridge to my speech that I may pass over to Your truth. Your love is a bridge to Your

¹⁰ Cf. *Letter to Publius* 4.

¹¹ Cf. E. BECK, *Ephräms Polemik gegen Mani und Manichaer im Rahmen der zeitgenössischen griechischen Polemik und der des Augustinus*, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 391, Sub 55, Louvain (1978), 67-110.

¹² Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 44: 7.

¹³ Cf. S. P. BROCK, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of St. Ephrem*, Kalamazoo, Michigan 1992, 54.

¹⁴ Cf. T. KOONAMMAKKAI, "The Self-Revealing God and Man in Ephrem", 244.

¹⁵ Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 11: 7-11.

¹⁶ The Syriac alphabet (*yod* = *y*) is the first letter of the name *yešū'* (Jesus).

servant; by You shall I pass over to Your Father; I will pass over and say, blessed be He that softened down His might in His Son¹⁷.

In Ephrem's vision, divine revelation has a progressive character. Having its beginning in the creation, especially in the symbols of nature, and in the divine names of scripture, it reaches its final fulfilment in the incarnation of the Son of God. All the moments of the progressive divine revelation aim at human ascent to the divine realm.

3.1 Images of Clothing, Mirror and Pearl

The imagery of clothing, a common experiential language, plays an important role in Christian theology. The roots of this imagery can be seen in the Bible. In the words of the Psalmist God clothes human soul with honour and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment (cf. *Ps* 104,1-2). St. Paul frequently uses the language of clothing in the context of Baptism as the means of putting on of Christ (cf. *Rom* 13,14; *Gal* 3,27). The use of the image of the robe of glory is very frequent in Syriac theology, especially in Ephrem's writings¹⁸.

Making use of this imagery Ephrem unveils the mystery of divine revelation in its different stages. God clothed himself with the

symbols of the world, the names of the scripture, and finally the human body. Ephrem's teachings on divine grace find rich and profound expression in the image of the robe of glory. He explicates through this image the various stages of salvation history and the process of divinization. While clothing with the robe of glory signifies the presence of divine grace and the potentiality for divinization in human beings, its disrobing means the loss of the same grace and the consequent human incapability of becoming divine.

Another imagery that deserves special attention is the mirror. E. Beck has brought out the importance of this imagery in Ephrem¹⁹. Mirror is a means for the reflection of a reality in its different aspects. It leads human beings to self-knowledge and moral improvement. Mirror is an instrument of divine ethical lessons²⁰. Through this imagery Ephrem helps his readers to delve deep into the divine realities, reflected in the world and in scripture. For him the world and scripture²¹ are mirrors of God. They give reflections and knowledge about the different facets of the divine truths. Ephrem applies the image of mirror to Christ. The Son is the mirror of the invisible Father. Christ reflects and makes visible the Father²². Likewise human being, created in the image and likeness of God, is a

¹⁷ *Hymns on Faith* 6: 17.

¹⁸ Cf. S. P. BROCK, "Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition", in *Studies in Syriac Christianity*, S. P. Brock, Hampshire 1992, 38.

¹⁹ Cf. E. BECK, "Das Bild vom Spiegel bei Ephräm", in *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 19 (1953), 5-24.

²⁰ Cf. K. E. McVEY, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, New York 1989, 37.

²¹ Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 57: 8.

²² Cf. *Hymns against Heresies* 23: 17.

divine mirror that reflects the image of God, i.e., Christ²³. As S. P. Brock refers, in late antiquity, mirrors were made of bronze. They were in need of continuous polishing²⁴. Ephrem recalls of the greatest need of polishing and illumining the mirror²⁵. This polishing refers to one's own self-purification and the consequent improvement in moral standards²⁶.

Probably the pearl is the most famous and favourite image in Ephrem. The pearl is a symbol of the kingdom of God (cf. *Mt* 13,45), Christ himself and his body: "One day, my brethren, I took a pearl into my hands; in it I beheld symbols which told of the Kingdom, images and figures of God's majesty. It became a fountain from which I drank the mysteries of the Son"²⁷. S. P. Brock finds comparison between the birth of the pearl and of Christ. Just as the pearl came into existence when lightening struck mussel in the sea, Christ's birth happened in the flesh of Mary, the watery flesh, through the fire of the Holy Spirit. Ephrem mentions human beings who stripped bare and dived down and drew the Pearl²⁸. Here there is an indication to those being baptized, stripped of their clothes at Baptism, dive down into the baptismal font and bring up Christ the Pearl. The unity of the sacraments of Christian initiation can be observed here. Being anointed

with the oil, the candidate dive into the baptismal font and receive Christ the Pearl through holy Communion²⁹. Ephrem makes use of this image as perfect symbol of virginity³⁰. Like the image of the mirror, the pearl is also a means of reflection of the arrays of the divine realities. Enlightened with the purified eyes of faith one can certainly attain a clear vision of Christ the Pearl.

3.2 Sacramental Character of the World

Ephrem is very conscious of the sacramental character of the world, because of the potentiality of everything in it to act as a witness and pointer to the Creator. Since God created the world, his imprints are seen everywhere. Everything in the world carries God's image. The sacramental character of the world is very clear from the following citation:

In every place, if I look, His symbol is there, and when you read, you will find His types. For by Him were created all creatures, and He engraved His symbols upon His possessions. When He created the world, He gazed at it and adorned it with His images. Streams of His symbols opened, flowed and poured forth His symbols on His members³¹.

²³ Cf. *Hymns on Virginity* 31: 12.

²⁴ Cf. S. P. BROCK, *The Luminous Eye*, 39.

²⁵ Cf. *Hymns on Nisbis* 16: 1-4.

²⁶ Cf. E. BECK, "Das Bild vom Spiegel bei Ephräm", 12.

²⁷ *Hymns on Faith* 81: 1.

²⁸ Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 85: 6.

²⁹ Cf. S. P. BROCK, *The Luminous Eye*, 106-107.

³⁰ Cf. *Hymns on Virginity* 2: 4; 2: 10; *Hymns on Nativity* 12: 7; 16: 12.

³¹ *Hymns on Virginity* 20: 12.

Ephrem sees God's presence, which is not comprehended properly by the created world, through symbols everywhere in nature:

In every place is Your mysterious Presence, Lord, and from every place You are withdrawn. Though Your mysterious presence be in the height, yet it feels not that You are what you are. Though Your mysterious presence be in the depth, it is not comprehended what it is. Though Your mysterious presence be in the sea, from the sea You are concealed: though Your mysterious presence be in the dry land, it knows not that You are He. Blessed be the glorious hidden One, since even Your little mystery is a fountain of mysteries!³²

Types and symbols of the world are invitations for acquiring knowledge of divine reality. They enrich humanity with new and profound meanings³³. They are pointers to the hidden power or nature of God. They have the potential of taking on a deeper significance infusing meaning into everything³⁴. R. Murray writes about the sacramental character of the world: "God has filled creation with his traces, inadequate yet valid pointers to himself; he has given man a mind and the faculty of language which can appreciate these pointers, express them and follow them by the light of the gift of faith"³⁵. S. P. Brock is of the opinion that the key to Ephrem's understanding of

the world as a sacrament is the sense of wonder which is related to the whole economy of the incarnation. Creation and the incarnation are sources of wonder, leading humanity to the Creator. The Spirit's operation in Mary resulted the incarnation; likewise his operation in the creation gave birth to the symbols of Christ³⁶. Ephrem writes about these two conceptions: "The creation conceived His symbols; Mary conceived His limbs"³⁷.

According to Ephrem nature and scripture (*kyânâ* and *ktâbâ*) are the two treasures of divine revelation. For him they are the two pure fountains of God's self-disclosure. They are like two books for Ephrem in which God has written his plan of salvation. These treasures are full of types and symbols leading the believer to the knowledge of God and the unbeliever to confusion:

In his book Moses described the creation of the natural world so that both Nature and Scripture might bear witness to the Creator: Nature, through man's use of it, Scripture, through his reading of it. These are the witnesses which reach everywhere, they are to be found at all times, present at every hour, confuting the unbeliever who defames the Creator³⁸.

God in his love for humanity reveals himself by means of types and symbols,

³² HdF 4: 9.

³³ Cf. S. P. BROCK, "World and Sacraments in the Writings of the Syrian Fathers", in *Sobornost* 6 (1974), 692.

³⁴ Cf. S. P. BROCK, *The Luminous Eye*, 54-56.

³⁵ R. MURRAY, "The Theory of Symbolism in St. Ephrem's Theology", in *Parole de l'Orient*, 6-7 (1975-1976), 1-20.

³⁶ Cf. S. P. BROCK, "World and Sacrament in the Writings of the Syrian Fathers", 695.

³⁷ *Hymns on Virginity* 6: 7.

³⁸ *Hymns on Paradise* 5: 2.

found in nature and in scripture. He clothed himself with types and symbols as a veil to protect humanity from the overpowering brightness of his full revelation. Since human beings are incapable of seeing God in his full brightness, he allows man to experience his divine presence through the rays of types and symbols. Ephrem makes it clear as follows:

In the Ray from Himself He softened His wondrous might; for our Strengtheners would not weaken. He was pleasing unto us, when He softened it for us. By a ray we have represented Him, not that this is indeed like Him, for there is nothing which accurately shadows forth Him. He lets Himself be shadowed forth in similitudes, that according to our strength we may learn Him in His blessed dispensations³⁹.

Since the world is the creation of God, everything in it can be pointers to God's existence and creative activity⁴⁰. The Spirit of God transforms everything in the world with new meaning⁴¹. Since this world is a mirror of God, it can reflect the different facets of divine realities. When this mirror is polished and viewed with luminous faith, it gives insights into the multifaceted meanings of the hidden divine realities. The transcendent and hidden God becomes immanent and manifest through types and symbols, and what is necessary on the human side is to see and

experience him with the luminous eye of faith. It is only through faith that humanity can have any knowledge of the divine revelation⁴². Only in the light of faith, illumined by the power of the Holy Spirit that symbols become meaningful⁴³. It is the Spirit of God who opens the eyes of the faithful to see God's imprints in the created world. The more the eyes of faith are clear and illumined, the more the symbols will become visible and meaningful.

Just as in the case of the world, the Holy Spirit endows the scripture with all sorts of new meanings. The Spirit causes rivers of water to flow from the scripture, giving life to its letters. This spiritual water quenches the thirst of everyone⁴⁴. Here it is interesting to note the comparison Ephrem makes between the travelling rock that accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness (cf. 1 Cor 10,4) and the scripture that follows the faithful in their earthly life:

I considered the Word of the Creator, and likened it to the rock that marched with the people of Israel in the wilderness; it was not from the reservoir of water contained within it that it poured forth for them glorious streams: there was no water in the rock, yet oceans sprang forth from it: Just so did the Word fashion created things out of nothing⁴⁵.

³⁹ *Hymns on Faith* 6: 3.

⁴⁰ Cf. S. P. BROCK, *The Luminous Eye*, 56.

⁴¹ Cf. S. P. BROCK, "World and Sacrament in the Writings of the Syrian Fathers", 691.

⁴² Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 72: 2.

⁴³ Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 5: 18; 25: 5.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Commentary on Diatessaron* I: 18.

⁴⁵ *Hymns on Paradise* 5: 1; cf. S. P. BROCK, "World and Sacrament in the Writings of the Syrian Fathers", 691.

Ephrem compares scripture to the image of mirror wherein truth is concealed⁴⁶. If human beings are well illumined with the eyes of faith, scripture will certainly lead them to the Creator. What God intends through revelation is humanity's ascension to the divine realm. Being conscious of the inadequacy of the metaphorical language in describing the greatness of the divine realities, Ephrem reminds his readers that the metaphors put on by God are meant for humanity's benefit, and not for mere intellectual treatment:

If someone concentrates his attention solely on the metaphors used of God's majesty, he abuses and misrepresents that majesty and thus errs by means of those metaphors with which God clothed Himself for his benefit, and he is ungrateful to that Grace which stooped low to the level of his childishness; although it has nothing in common with him yet Grace clothed in his likeness in order to bring him to the likeness of itself⁴⁷.

As Ephrem makes it very explicit, God's descent and his putting on of types and symbols aim at humanity's growth in the divine knowledge⁴⁸. God's revelation in nature and in scripture is meant to unite the created world with the Creator. The symbols and types are to direct and draw near humanity to God. S. P. Brock emphasizes on Ephrem's view of considering the world and scripture as connecting links between the different stages of salvation history through means of

symbols and types, the pointers to God's hiddenness:

Time and time again Ephrem sets the World alongside the Bible as a co-witness to God, urging man to belief in the Creator. The method of witness of both of them is essentially by means of symbols and types – innumerable veiled pointers to God's hiddenness. They are the means of God's revelation of himself to man, a revelation which in one sense culminates in the Incarnation, but in another awaits its final fulfilment until the Second Coming – an ambivalence between the temporal and the eschatological that is current, especially in early Christian thought⁴⁹.

In short, the symbolic reality of the world together with scripture through types and symbols is a medium of God's revelation and relationship with human beings. According to Ephrem the world is not a closed reality in itself, but opened to God. Since God is related to the world through the acts of creation and revelation, human beings can approach him through the medium of the world and scripture.

3.3 God's Self-Disclosure in Divine Names

In addition to the types and symbols found in nature God has 'put on' (*lbes*) names and titles, either perfect or borrowed, as a means of self-revelation. This is clear from what Ephrem says: "For He has Names

⁴⁶ Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 67: 8.

⁴⁷ *Hymns Paradise* 11: 6.

⁴⁸ Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 32: 9.

⁴⁹ S. P. BROCK, "World and Sacrament in the Writings of the Syrian Fathers", 687.

perfect and appropriated; also He has Names borrowed and transient, which He suddenly clad on, and suddenly put off, as that 'He repented', 'forgot' and 'remembered'⁵⁰. While perfect names such as Being, Creator, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit indicate something of God's true Being, borrowed names are the metaphors taken from ordinary human experience as a means of divine revelation⁵¹. Shepherd, Vineshoot, Grape, Medicine of Life, Farmer, Architect, Tower, House of Refuge⁵² are some of the examples of borrowed names. Ephrem speaks of the importance of God's perfect names:

Be warned by His perfect and Holy Names, for if you deny one of them, they will all have flown away and departed. They are all linked one into another, and they bear up all things; as do the pillars of the world, water, fire, and air. If one of them were to cease to exist, then would the world be nigh to falling to ruin⁵³.

In Ephrem's language the names that God 'put on' (*lbes*) are only the metaphors, borrowed from the human condition⁵⁴. Though there are several hymns entirely devoted to this subject, *Hymns on Faith* 31 is important. It begins with, "Let us praise Him that put on the names of the members: who named Himself ears to teach that He heard

us, who surnamed Himself eyes to shew that He saw us, the names only of things did He put on"⁵⁵.

Using the metaphor of divine names Ephrem inspires human beings to a deeper reflection on the divine nature. Divine names especially the perfect ones are hints to God's nature. Through them some aspects of the hidden nature of God is revealed for the benefit of human beings. According to Ephrem perfect names are the highest meeting point between divinity and humanity, and they are means of revelation of God's hiddenness. The borrowed names which God condescends to put on are designed to draw humanity upward; not to drag God down to the human level⁵⁶. God's names shall not be equalized with human names. God has put on human names so that human being may put on God's names⁵⁷. Thus, a pattern of exchange between God and humanity can be seen in the theology of divine names. Humanity becomes the beneficiary in this mutual exchange, because the divine names make human beings great, while human names make God small. Ephrem explains:

Merciful was the Lord in that He also clad on our names; even to a grain of mustard seed He condescended to compare Himself. He gave unto us His Names,

⁵⁰ *Hymns on Faith* 44: 2.

⁵¹ Cf. S. P. BROCK, *The Luminous Eye*, 62.

⁵² Cf. *Hymns on Nativity* 3: 15.

⁵³ *Hymns on Faith* 44: 3.

⁵⁴ Cf. S. P. BROCK, *The Luminous Eye*, 42.

⁵⁵ *Hymns on Faith* 31: 1.

⁵⁶ Cf. S. P. BROCK, *The Luminous Eye*, 63-65; *Hymns on Faith* 54: 8.

⁵⁷ Cf. T. KOONAMMAKKAL, "Divine Names and Theological Language in Ephrem", 320.

He took from us our names. His Names made us great, our names made Him small. Blessed be he who covered his own name with Your goodly Name, and has ornamented with Your Name his own names⁵⁸.

Divine names are a medium for human being's approach to God⁵⁹. They are means of communication between God and human kind. The name Jesus with its appropriate functional meaning gives true access to the transcendent God⁶⁰. Though Ephrem upholds the positivity of the divine names in human being's relation to God, he is conscious about the fact that the mutual exchange of the divine and human names does not make human beings equal or comparable to God⁶¹. Ephrem asks:

Who is there that is in such sort wholly unwise and hard hearted, as to fancy ever so short a while, that because men were called by His names, that the nature of man

and of God is one [and the same]; or again who, because the Lord was called by the Name of His servants, would imagine a thing made and the Maker to admit of being compared together?⁶²

Being conscious of the manifested and hidden nature of revelation in divine names, R. Murray places Ephrem's theology of names between apophatic and cataphatic poles⁶³.

3.4 Search for God in Reason and Faith

In his approach to God and the divine realities Ephrem is totally against pure rationalism⁶⁴ and the presumption that human intellect is able to pry into God. For him prying into the divine realities is impossible because of the ontological chasm and the fundamental difference between the Creator and the created beings⁶⁵. Therefore if anyone tries to investigate or pry into God through the revealed symbols and names, the result will be vain. Human understanding, good in

⁵⁸ *Hymns on Faith* 5: 7.

⁵⁹ Cf. R. MURRAY, "The Theory of Symbolism in St. Ephrem's Theology", 10.

⁶⁰ Cf. *Commentary on Diatessaron* 1; 25.

⁶¹ Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 5: 6-7.

⁶² *Hymns on Faith* 63: 9.

⁶³ Cf. R. MURRAY, "The Theory of Symbolism in St. Ephrem's Theology", 11.

⁶⁴ Ephrem refutes the rationalistic propaganda of the Arians who tried to scrutinize and pry into the divine realities in order to comprehend them. They aimed to fathom God's ineffable nature by human investigation and language. Ephrem opposes the Arian claim of issuing categorical statements about God. He is totally against any attempt at defining God whose outline is fixed by a created intellect. In many of the *Hymns on Faith* Ephrem speaks against this scrutinizing character of the 'Arians' or 'semi-Arians' whom he calls as 'disputants' or 'scrutinizers', the 'investigators' or 'researchers'. Cf. R. MURRAY, "St. Ephrem's Dialogue of Reason and Love", *Sobornost* 2/2 (1980), 26-30; R. P. C. HANSON, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381*, Edinburgh 1988.

⁶⁵ Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 9: 16; P. YOUSIF, "Approach to the Divine Realities in the Thought of St. Ephrem of Nisibis", in *The Church I love: A Tribute to Rev. Placid J. Podipara CMI*, J. Madey and G. Kaniarakath (eds.), Kottayam (1978).

itself, when it goes beyond its capacities before God's mystery, risks its own being. Rain is good, but its superabundance is disastrous; eating is necessary for health, but gluttony is injurious to the same; light is good, but the eye which faces the sun, produces an opposite effect. Likewise, seeking God is good, but the excessive research to 'see' and 'understand' spiritual realities makes human being blind:

And the doctrine which rightly orders all things, has been to us a fount of questioning disordering all things. The rain which profits all, by superabundance of it injures all; and the sun which illuminates all, by the might of it blinds all. Bread also which quickens all, to him that eats gluttonously is a murderer⁶⁶.

Theological investigation may be spiritually reprovéd, since it leads to the loss of faith. As R. Murray states, for Ephrem, "Reason insists – almost brutally – that the attempt to penetrate the nature of God is both folly and blasphemy"⁶⁷. Here the attempt is without faith, if it is with faith such attempt cannot be contemptéd. Those who are engaged in intellectual prying or scrutiny have ceased to believe and have renounced their faith and annulled their baptism⁶⁸. So Ephrem exhorts all to avoid scrutiny of the divine realities, because God cannot be submitted

to human investigation⁶⁹. Human senses as such are incapable of perceiving God, they need other faculties, the interior senses, which can go deeper into the perception of things. Ephrem highlights this point:

It is not for weak beings alone that the sight of Thee is too great, or the searching out of Thee is concealed: for the senses of the body, since they much need other senses which are in the inmost imagination, do not grasp even the smallest thing within their search⁷⁰.

Ephrem holds the view that even the interior faculties do not arrive at the being of God. Even if human beings may have some experience of God through divine revelation, they can know nothing about his essence. Ephrem writes:

However much, Lord, I would feel You, it is still not You yourself I touch, for my mind can touch nothing of Your hiddenness: it is just a visible, illumined, image that I see in the symbol of You; for all investigation into Your being is hidden⁷¹.

God is revealed in his goodness, but concealed in his essence. His treasure is open, himself is withdrawn⁷².

For Ephrem, though God is experiential, he is hidden and mysterious. There are real epistemological limits to the human

⁶⁶ *Hymns on Faith* 28: 15.

⁶⁷ R. MURRAY, "St. Ephrem's Dialogue of Reason and Love", 27.

⁶⁸ Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 9:10; 23: 2.

⁶⁹ Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 9:12, 13.

⁷⁰ *Hymns on Faith* 4: 6.

⁷¹ *Hymns on Nisibis* 50: 13.

⁷² Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 72: 11, 12.

experience of God. In this respect, one can observe the similarity between Ephrem's thinking and that of the Cappadocians who maintained absolute human ignorance about the essence of God⁷³. Gregory of Palamas' teachings also is in harmony with the same thinking. According to him, human beings can have knowledge of God only through the energies or operations of God, while the essence or nature of God is unknowable or absolutely inaccessible⁷⁴.

However Ephrem's criticism against the intellectual scrutiny of God does not mean that he is totally anti-intellectual and against all systematic and rational approaches. In some of his presentations especially in his polemical works Ephrem tries to refute the false teachings logically and rationally and attempts to defend the orthodox teachings on faith (*ḥaymānutā*) and freedom (*ḥerutā*) etc. A human search for God, with reasonable limits, is not impossible. According to Ephrem the intellect is an extremely important gift of God to human beings, and it can be used to understand what is revealed. Since God has spoken in the human language of symbols and names, humanity can respond to them in such a way which cannot be invalid⁷⁵. What

Ephrem advises is that the human intellect should not vainly seek to understand things, which lie beyond its comprehension. Ephrem reminds his readers: "There is indeed in the Church a seeking which examines things revealed, but not one that pries into things hidden"⁷⁶. Ephrem advocates a healthy combination of both reason and faith so as to arrive at the truth. The believing mind with sufficient discernment (*buḡānā*) is enabled to attain the divine truth through an intellectual vision of the object⁷⁷.

For Ephrem, as R. Murray points out, the right attitude towards God is not one of arguments and speculations, but the way of silence, prayer and inner harmony⁷⁸. According to Ephrem, it is not through any intellectual claim or abstract approach that one can meet God, but through faith and prayer⁷⁹. Faith is a pre-requisite for any human approach to God. It is faith that gives life to the soul⁸⁰. Ephrem describes faith as an eye which can see hidden things⁸¹. It is the inner eye of the mind⁸² or of the soul⁸³. This spiritual eye can be illumined by God, if it is offered to his hand⁸⁴. When the spiritual eye of faith is luminous and clear, through the gifts of truth, love, wonder, praise and prayer, it can perceive the hidden divine realities. The human approach, guided by these

⁷³ Cf. N. RUSSELL, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, Oxford 2004, 233.

⁷⁴ Cf. J. MEYENDORFF, *Byzantine Theology. Historical Trends & Doctrinal Themes*, New York 1983, 139-140.

⁷⁵ Cf. R. MURRAY, "St. Ephrem's Dialogue of Reason and Love", 26.

⁷⁶ *Hymns on Faith* 8: 9.

⁷⁷ Cf. *Hymns on the Church* 15:4; P. YOUSIF, "Approach to the Divine Realities in the Thought of St. Ephrem of Nisibis", 63.

⁷⁸ Cf. R. MURRAY, "The Theory of Symbolism in St. Ephrem's Theology", 18.

⁷⁹ Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 4: 5.

⁸⁰ Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 80: 1.

⁸¹ Cf. *Hymns on Church* 24: 3.

⁸² Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 53: 12.

⁸³ Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 5: 18.

⁸⁴ Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 16: 6.

elements, constitute an opening to God, an act by which God gives himself to man. For Ephrem the basic human attitude in the search for God is one of faith, not of prying: "By faith He draws nigh unto you: but by prying you remove far off from His blessings. [...] For He is very manifest to him who seeks Him; and very concealed from him who pries into Him"⁸⁵.

Praise is the outgrowth of wonder, and it is expressed in prayer. The proper posture of a human being before God is an attitude of prayer arising from the contemplation of the mysteries of God, given both in nature and in scripture. The human attitude before God should be one of praying, not one of prying. It is through the means of prayer that one should approach God: "When the Creator trod a path for the creature that the offerings of prayer might come to His door, it was not a path for prying which He made that by it man might come to the door of the [divine] essence"⁸⁶. The sense of wonder is all pervasive in Ephrem's writings. Ephrem exclaims: "Oh! Wonder, that God should have humbled Himself to the dust, [...]"⁸⁷. For him God is a source of amazement⁸⁸. Wonder gives birth to love and praise. Corresponding to the extent of love through praise, one may acquire life that has no measure⁸⁹. Love simply

has to praise and respond to the revelation, and experience God⁹⁰. On the human way to God truth and love are inseparable; without love, truth cannot be attained. Ephrem sings: "Truth and Love are wings that cannot be separated, since Truth without Love cannot fly, neither can Love mount without Truth. Their yoke is that of amity"⁹¹. Love is the treasurer of the heavenly treasure⁹².

Conclusion

Any human approach to God is the fruit or the consequence of a divine call. It is God who attracts the human being to be in his presence. It is the divine gratuitousness and condescension that invite the human being to begin his search for the mystery of God, illumined by faith and animated by piety. Through divine grace and faith God fills the human heart with his presence. It is the responsibility of each one to respond to this divine presence positively through an attitude of prayer and praise. As much as one is open to God through faith, love, truth, wonder, praise and prayer, communion with God can be attained. In short, as T. Bou Mansour points out it, the optimism of Ephrem's theology does not rest purely on the capacity of reason, but on the capacity of love and faith⁹³.



⁸⁵ *Hymns on Faith* 72: 2, 8.

⁸⁶ *Hymns on Faith* 11: 11.

⁸⁷ *Hymns on Faith* 46: 11.

⁸⁸ Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 4: 11.

⁸⁹ *Hymns on Nisibis* 50: 5.

⁹⁰ Cf. R. MURRAY, "St. Ephrem's Dialogue of Reason and Love", 27.

⁹¹ *Hymns on Faith* 20: 12.

⁹² Cf. *Hymns on Faith* 32: 2, 3.

⁹³ Cf. T. BOU MANSOUR, *La pensée symbolique de saint Éphrem le syrien*, Kaslik 1988, 536.

Symbolical Significance of Baptismal Theology

Rev. Prof. John Moolan

Introduction

In liturgy, everything done under the mediation of symbols brings forth the real sense of celebration as heaven on earth. Liturgical symbols are the visible signs of invisible realities, which relate the human life to the divine life. In other words, they are the divine interventions of God on earth to manifest the mysterious relationship between God and man. They create heaven on earth and elevate earth to heaven, as it is a divine will and a human need.

As a divine will, Christ used symbols to make Himself known to the people. His own incarnation was the very first and the greatest symbol ever employed in history for the divine manifestation of making God visible to humanity. His baptism in Jordan was the symbol of the first public manifestation of the Holy Trinity to the world. In order to give life-giving water, He asked for material water (Jn 4:6). For teaching on life-giving bread, He multiplied ordinary bread (Jn 6:51, 57). For making apostles the fishers of men, He called them as anglers (Mk 1:17). He cured deafness and dumbness through the symbolical acts of putting the fingers into the ears and touching the tongue with spittle (Mk 7:33). For healing the blind, He anointed the eyes with the clay of spittle with the request to wash in the pool

of Siloam (Jn 9:6). He instituted Eucharist under the symbol of bread and wine; and instituted other sacraments as the symbolic rivulets of His divine graces conferred in different occasions of life. Finally, He established Church as the symbol of His own mystical body, the Church.

As a human need, symbols are the God given assistance to humanity for grasping the invisible divine realities on earth. If we were spiritual beings, then we would have given spiritual means to know the spiritual realities. However, since we are material beings, we need material means to know spiritual realities. Since the soul is in union with body, better understanding of divine realities, as interventions of God on earth, takes place through material realities as symbols. Symbols help to know easily the divine dimensions of material applications used in liturgy in order to keep up the faith experience alive in day-to-day life.

Baptismal symbols are very rich in theology. The ways and means of administering baptism received their symbolical significance through centuries. The types and methods of baptism manifest the symbolical relevance of Christian becoming of one with Christ as the members of the Church. Symbolically the baptismal water is

both destructive and creative – death dealing (death to sin) and life giving (life in Christ) – as well as purifying and renovating through washing and bathing. Baptisteries and baptismal fonts in their shapes and postures manifest the paschal dimensions of Christian life. Jewish ablutions and initiations together with Old Testament prefigurations bring forth the significance of baptismal symbols in the economy of salvation. Baptisms of John, Christ, and Christians symbolically elevate and theologically deepen Christian life as a life in union with paschal mysteries of Christ conducive to the children of God.

1. Types of Baptism

Three types of baptisms known in the Church are those of water and Spirit (CCC 1213), of desire, and of blood (LG 16). Baptism of water and Spirit is the formal baptism administered in the parish church with approved form by an authorised person (CCEO 677-678, CCC 1256). Baptisms of desire and of blood are the informal baptisms of non-believers who earnestly desire and strive to live a good life and seek God sincerely even to the extent of shedding their blood as martyrs of truth. Hence the declaration, “There is no salvation outside the Church”,¹ is to be understood as if there is no one outside the Church, because all are created in the image of God and called to become the children of God in one way or other without minimising the role of evangelization throughout the world (Mt 28:19).

2. Methods of Baptism

There are four ways of administering baptism as submersion, immersion, effusion, and aspersion.² The very first and the only method of baptism in the early Church was the submersion, and all other methods were the later developments in the Church. In general, at present the Orientals follow the method of submersion or immersion, whereas the Occidentals follow the method of effusion.

a. Submersion

In submersion, the celebrant dips the whole body of the candidate in water and rises quickly out of it signifying drowning to die and bury with Christ in order to rise with Him. The dipping under the water and emerging from it indicate the power and effect of baptism as the slaying of old Adam and the resurrection of new Adam.

b. Immersion

In immersion, either the whole body or the head alone goes under water and comes out of it. Thus, the term immersion includes also the act of submersion signifying to die, bury, and rise with Christ. The immersion takes place also through pouring water over the head of the candidate standing, kneeling, or sitting in the water or by partially lowering an infant into the water symbolising baptismal bathing as purification.

¹ Cyprian of Carthage (d.258), *Letter (73) to Jubaianus* 21, declared it in the synod of Carthage (251-252).

² S.A.Stauffer, *On Baptismal Fonts: Ancient and Modern* (Nottingham 1994) 46-47.

c. Effusion

In effusion, takes place the pouring of water over the head of someone who stands outside the font bending to the receptacle of water symbolising baptismal washing as cleansing.

d. Aspersio

In aspersio, takes place the sprinkling of water over the head of someone who is sick. This is the clinical baptism symbolising the baptismal meaning as burial with Christ. The parallelism is found in the strewing of frankincense over the dead body by the celebrant saying, "Taken from dust, be turned back to dust," in the concluding ceremony of burial rite.

3. Baptismal Water

The primeval water of chaos (Gen 1:2), floodwater of destruction (Gen 6:17), Red Sea water of death (Ex 14:28), and the Jordan water of precaution (Josh 2:13) are symbolically turned to the pure baptismal water of divine cleansing, the deep water of death to sin, and the Jordan water of life (Mt 3:13, 16) through its blessing. Baptismal water drowns the baptised to induce purification, healing, life, and new birth in them.

a. Purification

Just as the natural bath gives natural cleansing, so also the Spiritual bath gives spiritual cleansing. Purification of soul from impurities (Ps 51:2) is a requisite for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to create the temple of God in soul. Washing away of sin through the baptismal bath makes the

baptised worthy to receive the grace towards a great transformation to the real image of God. Without purity, nothing takes place in divine realm.

b. Healing

Baptismal washing heals all scars of sin and restores purity in the recipient as it was experienced by Naaman in Jordan River (2King 5:14), the crippled man at Beth-Zatha pool (Jn 5:7) and the blind man in the pool of Siloam (Jn 9:7). Baptismal water absolves both the original and actual sins in life removing the sting of death and inducing the soothing of divine concern. Baptism showers the great mercy of God on humanity for the reconciliation between the heavenly and earthly beings. The regaining of lost Paradise through baptism is the greatest consolation the humanity ever achieved in life.

c. Life

Jesus, the life-giving water (Jn 7:37), gives life and growth to the newborn through the baptismal water. Baptismal water vivifies and flourishes the baptised similar to the trees growing by the streams of water yield fruits in seasons without withering leaves (Ps 1:3). This is a new life in Jesus, which provides real peace, joy, and satisfaction through sanctification.

d. Birth

Baptismal water gives birth to a new person. Just as the brooding of the Spirit over the primordial water created the world (Gen 1:2), so also the power of the Holy Spirit present in baptismal water creates a

new person. In this spiritual birth, takes place the renovation of the person with a new vigour to follow Christ at any cost even unto martyrdom. Christians are living martyrs who fight against evil influences to retain intact the newness of life attained in baptism.

4. Fragrant Lukewarm Water

The Antiocheans mix cold and hot water in the baptismal font, and sign it with *Muron* or *Sayth* (consecrated olive oil). The consecrated oil is fragrant, since it contains balsam – the mixture of different aromas of fragrant resins. Hence, the mixing of *Muron* or *Sayth* in the lukewarm water makes it fragrant to represent the Jordan River water, which is seemingly lukewarm and fragrant also, since it is the result of the confluence of three rivers like Hermon, Yarmuck, and Yabock. Hermon water is cold, since it flows from the snow covered Hermon Mountain. Yarmuck water is hot, since it flows through the Dhan desert. Yabock water is fragrant, since it passes through the valley of Gilead where grows the fragrant resin producing trees like jedamanji, myrrh, pine, and fir.³

5. Baptismal Font

Font is a receptacle to hold water. The word *font* is derived from the Latin word *fons* meaning fountain, spring, or source. The usage of baptismal font probably started with the custom of baptising in springs or

fountains. Jordan River became the first and most venerated baptismal font in history due to Jesus' baptism in it. Public fonts like oceans and seas, lakes and ponds, streams and rivers as large natural water vessels were the first Christian places of baptism in the early Church.⁴ Formation of baptismal fonts like bathtubs in houses of worship started to take place in the third century.⁵ In the early Church, the simplest types of these fonts as private ones for baptism were in catacombs, prisons, and houses due to persecutions.

The freedom movement in the Church started by the Roman emperor Constantine in 313 prompted to build separate baptismal houses with fonts known as baptisteries (Greek *baptisterion* meaning swimming bath) either detached or loosely attached to the church buildings to provide privacy for the adults who were baptised naked. For this purpose, there were columns around it with curtains to hide the nudity of catechumens during immersion and anointing. The fonts in ground pools were large enough to accommodate several persons for standing and kneeling during the ceremony.

The essential part of the font is known as *piscina* (fishpond or swimming pool), the stone basin to hold water at the centre of the baptismal font with a drainage. The descending and the ascending steps in the font signified the process of participation in the

³ R.P.Gwinn, P.B.Norton, R.McHenry (eds.), "Jordan River," *The New Encyclopaedia of Britannica* 6 (Chicago, 1993) 616-617.

⁴ Justin the Martyr (d.165), *Apology* 1.61; Tertullian (d. 220), *De baptismo* 4.

⁵ J.G.Davies, *The Origin and Development of Early Christian Church Architecture* (London, 1952) 102; J.R.Walton, *Art and Worship: A Vital Connection* (Wilmington 1988) 23.

death and resurrection of Christ. As a rule, a font should be of 2.50 metres across with water about one metre deep. Ideally, it should be large enough at least one metre across with minimum water of $\frac{1}{2}$ metre deep to accommodate the immersion of adults as well as infants who stand or kneel or sit in it. For this purpose, some modern fonts have two levels of water, one raised area for infants and other lower pool for adults.

The early baptisteries were also the places of assembly, asylum (refuge), and burial. Burial in baptisteries was prior to the burial around the churches or in cemeteries. Ancient baptisteries contained also altars dedicated to John the Baptist where from the bishop administered Holy Communion to the neophytes (the newborn). At the right angle of the altar was the Episcopal throne (*Cathedra*) where from the bishop interrogated the catechumens and chrismatised the neophytes.

By the eighth century, the baptisteries as separate buildings disappeared in the West due to the general phenomena of infant baptism, partially due to the high infant death rate and the parental fear of original sin. Hence, the baptismal fonts, instead of large pools became smaller as mounted types with sides partially above the ground to help the celebrant to handle the child with great ease during the

submersion or immersion; and the *narthex*, the western portico of the church building, became the place of baptistery.

Eventually by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, fonts in the West became still smaller and smaller resembling tanks and tubs set on bases of one or more pedestals rather than pools. During the thirteenth century locked covers on fonts appeared due to the stealing of the consecrated water from fonts to use for witchcrafts and black magic.⁶

By the end of the sixteenth century, when the effusion (pouring) replaced submersion or immersion, the fonts in West became minimal in size resembling bowls like water basins, which lost the biblical and patristic understandings of baptism as bath, birth, death, burial, and resurrection. After Vatican II, a growing awareness in this regard has taken place recognizing the need of fonts designed and constructed to accommodate the immersion and even submersion of adults and infants.⁷ In the East, however, as a whole, they never lost the symbolical size and significance of fonts except for some Latinised tendencies prevailed in some areas.

a. Different Types

The womb⁸ (birth) and tomb⁹ (death/burial/resurrection) symbolism of font, started with the concept of rebirth in water

⁶ S.A. Stauffer, *On Baptismal Font*, 16.

⁷ Ibidem, 13-14.

⁸ The womb imagery of baptismal font is predominant both in the East and in West. Irenaeus of Lyons (177-202), *Adversus haereses* 4, 'Font is a womb'; Tertullian of Carthage (d. 220), *De baptismo* 1, 'Baptised are little fishes born in water with Christ the great Fish'; Zeno of Verona (362-370/71), *Invitations to the Font* 1.55, 'Font is the sweet womb of the ever virgin mother, the Church'; Ambrose (374-397), *De mysteriis* 9.59, 'Baptism is the entry to the mother's womb to be born again'; Aphrahat (d. ca. 345), *Demonstration* 6.14, 'Font is a womb of

and Spirit (Jn 3:5), paved the way for different types of baptismal fonts¹⁰ in the Church. The most ancient fonts were of round shapes in Rome, and of octagonal shapes in Milan. The transformation of early Christian fonts over years from one shape into other with varied symbolisms is quite interesting to note in history though not often possible to provide precise dates. Thus we see five types of baptismal fonts as quadrilateral, hexagonal, octagonal, quatrefoil, and polygonal with rich symbolisms.

1. Quadrilateral/Quadrilobe¹¹

This is the most ancient four-sided irregular-rectangle coffin shaped font in the mid-third century, which resembled both the Roman and Syrian tomb symbolising burial with Christ (Rom 6:4; Gal 2:20; Colo 3:3).¹² Catacombs included this types of fonts over which sometimes a fresco of Christ's baptism

with an angel and a deer depicted on its sides indicated the catechumen's thirst for God as a deer thirsts for flowing streams (Ps 42:1-2).

2. Polygonal/Polylobe

This is the round or oval shaped font originated from Roman bath-basins of circular form in the fourth century. These types are common in the East symbolising bath and rebirth in the womb of the Church.¹³ The virginal womb of the mother Church through the breath of God conceives and gives birth to her children in the stream surged from the pierced side of Christ (Jn 19:34). The purification or the cleansing of children oppressed by original sin takes place in this bath.¹⁴

3. Octagonal

This is the fourth century eight-sided font found inside the baptistery of the same shape,

producing the children of the second birth'; Ephrem (306-373), *Hymnen de virginitate* 7.7, 'Font as a womb gives birth rejuvenating the old'; Ephrem, *Hymnen de Nativitate* 8.9, 'Christian sanctification takes place in the womb of baptism'; Narsai (399-502), *Liturgical Homilies* 21.46, 53, 'Font is the womb of water'; Narsai, *On Epiphany* 438, 541, 'Font is the womb of baptism'; Theodore of Mopsuestia (392-428), *Catechetical Homilies* 14, 'Font is the womb for the sacramental birth'.

⁹ The tomb imagery of baptismal font is also predominant both in the East and in West. Origen (d.254), *In Romanos* 5.8, 'Font is a sepulchre'; Ambrose (374-397), *Sermones* 2.19, 'Font is a kind of grave and tomb'; Cyril of Jerusalem (350-387), *Mystagogic catecheses* 2.4, 'Font is both the tomb and the mother'; Narsai (399-502), *Liturgical Homilies* 21. 51, 'Font is the tomb of baptism and the grave of water'.

¹⁰ S.A. Stauffer, *On Baptismal Font*, 17-61; T.J.Ofrasio, *The Baptismal Font: A Study of Patristic and Liturgical Texts* (Rome 1990); W.M.Bedard, *The Symbolism of the Baptismal Font in Early Christian Thought* (Washington 1951); E.W.Deichman, "Baptisterium", in T.Klauser (ed.), *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 1 (Stuttgart 1950) col. 1157-1167; F.J.Dölger, "Zur Symbolik des althristlichen Taufhauses," *Antike und Christentum* 4 (1934) 153-187; E.Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church* (Cambridge 2009) 819-852.

¹¹ There was also rectangular (square shape) font seemingly older than quadrilateral font, but it is not included here due to its lack of specific paschal symbolism other than mere containers of water used for baptism in the beginning stage.

¹² J.G.Davies, *The Architectural Setting of Baptism* (London 1962) 19.

¹³ Id., *The Architectural Setting of Baptism*, 21-22; R.Krautheimer, "Introduction to an Iconography of Medieval Architecture," in *Studies in Early Christian, Medieval, and Renaissance Art* (New York 1969) 121.

¹⁴ P.A.Underwood, *The Fountain of Life in Manuscripts of the Gospels*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 5 (Cambridge 1950) 55.

most commonly used in the West rather than the East, which symbolised the eighth day of resurrection as the eschatological dawning of a new age of our own resurrection and new life in Christ (Rom 6:4b, 9-11; Col 3:1).¹⁵ The most ancient type of this font is found in the cathedral of Milan where Ambrose the bishop-elect was baptised within a period of two weeks in between his ordination and consecration on 7 December 374. For him the font symbolised grave and tomb; and stressing the combination of burial and resurrection, he propagated the construction of octagonal fonts for cleansing and rebirth.¹⁶

4. Hexagonal

This is the fifth century six-sided font found both in the East and in West symbolising dying with Christ who was crucified and died on Friday, the sixth day of the week and the creation day of the Old Adam, in order to be united with Him (Rom 6:3, 5-6; Gal 2:20; Colo 3:3).¹⁷ The combination of hexagonal fonts in octagonal baptisteries indicated the paschal aspect of dying with Christ for rising with Him.¹⁸

5. Quatrefoil

This is the fifth or sixth century cruciform font appeared first in the West and later became popular in the East also symbolising crucifying and rising with Christ (Rom 6:3-11). Here the combination of both the sixth and eighth day indicates Christ's death and His victory over death.¹⁹

The Kelibian cruciform font in Tunisia (South Africa) dedicated in honour of Cyprian (+258), the bishop of Carthage, with mosaic iconography suggest the figurative entry to the Paradise through baptism.²⁰ Monogrammed Crosses with *Alpha* and *Omega* depicted on bottom and other places of the font emblematised Christ as eternal life. Fruit trees like apple, olive, fig, and palm depicted, seemingly growing out of water, at mid-level on the vertical walls signify the life giving water. Fishes and dolphins symbolising risen Christ depicted on and above the font represent the baptism-born Christians in the waters of the font.²¹ Lighted candles pictured at the interior corners of the font give iconographic reference to baptism as illumination or

¹⁵ R.Krautheimer, "Introduction to an Iconography of Medieval Architecture," 149-150.

¹⁶ *De Sacramentis* 1.12; 2.19-20, 23; 3.1; *De Mysteriis* 3.11; 14.21.

¹⁷ C.F.Rogers, *Baptism and Christian Archaeology* (Oxford 1903) 347.

¹⁸ J.G.Davies, *The Architectural Setting of Baptism*, 21.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 122.

²⁰ S.A. Stauffer, *On Baptismal Font*, 38-39.

²¹ For Tertullian (+220), *De baptismo* 1, 'Baptised as little fishes born in water have to remain in it for their survival with Christ, the Great fish'. For Ambrose (373-397), *De sacramentis* 3.3, 'Baptised have to imitate the fish in the sea, which swims on comfortably even when the various currents, huge waves, and fierce storms rage and blow. In the same way the baptised must be fishes to swim on easily against the waves of this sea-world without drowning'.

enlightenment (Eph 1:18; Heb 6:4, 10:32). Icons of a dove with an olive branch, Noah's arch between two birds, chalice, and Cross under a canopy supported by two columns depicted on the upper vertical surface of the font, signify the baptismal sanctity and the Eucharistic culmination of baptism.

b. Paschal Dimensions

The two fundamental paschal aspects of baptism are the sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom 6:3-4) with regeneration from above (Jn 3:5). Other features commonly found with them are the deliverance from the slavery of Satan to the freedom of Christ (Col 1:13), enlightenment to the spiritual intuition (Heb 6:4), clothing with Christ (Gal 3:27), and marking of Christ's ownership as the seal of covenant through spiritual circumcision (Rom 2:29; 2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:13).

Manifold types of baptismal fonts manifest the paschal dimensions of Christian life as sharing in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ in order to be born again. Participation in these mysteries signifies five stages of transformation as follows.

1. Dying

Baptismal immersion symbolising dying or crucifying with Christ implies sacrificing oneself as the cost of discipleship to be paid for the following up of Christ in life (Lk 14:27, 33). Those who follow Christ have to crucify themselves on their own crosses of daily life (Gal 6:14) for obtaining the salvific power of Cross (1 Cor 1:18). Baptism strengthens its recipients to overcome temptations against worldly inhibitions.

2. Burying

Baptismal immersion symbolising burying of the old person with Christ (Rom 6:6; Eph 4:22; Col 3:9) implies purification from all impurities (Jn 12:24; 1 Cor 15:36-37). Baptism absolves both the original and actual sins freeing the person from the bondage of death and sin. The old has to be decayed before the new appears (Jn 12:24).

3. Reviving

Baptismal emersion symbolising rising with Christ as a new person implies a new life situation (Rom 6:7f; Eph 4:23; Col 3:10). The Holy Spirit reinstates the lost image of God in the soul (Rom 8:11; 2 Tim 1:14) to mould it to a new temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19). Hence the baptism reminds the recipients never to return to his former ways of damnation in order to keep up intact the purity of the glorious robe received in baptism.

4. Creating

Baptismal washing symbolising purification implies the creation of the children of God. The Spirit of the divine adoptive son-ship received in baptism authorises the baptised to call God Father (*Abba* Rom 8:15-17; Gal 4:6-7). They are no longer slaves but children of God and inheritors of heaven through baptism, and blood brothers and sisters of Christ through Eucharist.

c. East Syrian Tradition

Third century *Acts of Thomas*, a Syrian apocryphal document containing the activities of Thomas in India, speaks about the baptismal immersions at three instances as one

in a river (ch.49), the other in a fountain (ch. 121), and the next in a large vessel (ch. 132).²² Isho-Yahb III (d. ca.657) who formed the order of infant baptism²³ prescribed the place of font inside the church, but outside the sanctuary closed to its southern part (left side), symbolising the purification place of the Church before the entry to the Promised Land of heaven.²⁴ According to Abdisho (d. 1318) the font has to keep up the same height of the altar, and the baptistery should contain a small altar for keeping the gospel and Cross to bless the water.²⁵

1. Middle East

In the Middle East, there are three ways of arranging fonts inside the parish church depending on the construction of the building. If it is one-nave church, baptistery stands outside the sanctuary closed to its south (left) end. In a two-nave church, the north (right) end of the south-nave closed to the sanctuary is the place. In a three-nave church, the whole south-nave is the baptistery.²⁶ Usually there are

two fonts inside the baptistery, one large type in rectangular for adults, and the other small type in round shape for infants.

2. Malabar²⁷

The idea of ritual purification in water is familiar to St. Thomas Christians in India. Indian concept of sacredness of water consists in the Sanctification obtained through the ceremonial bathing or washing in the two holy rivers like Ganges and Yamuna. Their union with the supposed river-goddess *Saraswathy* flowing underneath them known as *thrivenisangamam* (three-river union) effects the sanctifying action in water for Hindus. Therefore, Hindus always chose banks of rivers for the construction of their monasteries (*ashrams*) and temples. Whenever the proximity of rivers in front of them was difficult, they made artificial ponds or pools (*thirthams* or *vapis*) to help the people to take purifying ceremonial bath before worship.

As an adaptation of this Hindu practice of ritual purification in water, the Thomas

²² See A.F.J.Klijn, "Baptism in the Acts of Thomas," in J.Vellian (ed.), *Studies on Syrian Baptismal Rites*, Syrian Churches Series 6 (Kottayam, 1973) 57-58.

²³ See G. Mookan, K.A. Paul (trans.), "The Order of Holy Baptism by Mar Eshoo Yavh Catholicos of Kh'dayav and Afterwards Elaborated by Mar Elia Catholicos Patriarch", in *The Liturgy of the Holy Apostles Adai and Mari Together with the Liturgies of Mar Theodorus and Mar Nestorius and the Order of Baptism* (Trichur 1967) 117-173; G.Dietrich, *Die nestorianische Tauf liturgie* (Giessen, 1903); F.Chirayath, *Tauf liturgie des Syro-Malabarischen Ritus*, *Das Östliche Christentum* 32 (Würzburg 1981).

²⁴ See G.Khoury-Sarkis, "Le Livre du Guide de Yahya ibn Jarir," *L'Orient Syrien* 12 (1967) 326.

²⁵ J.Dauvillier, "L'archéologie de anciennes églises de rite Chaldéen", *Parole de l'Orient* 6.7 (1975-1976) 366.

²⁶ C.Dauphin, "The Rediscovery of the Nestorian Churches of the Hakkari", *Eastern Churches Review* 8 (1976) 56-57; U.M.De Villard, *Le chiese della Mesopotamia* (Rome 1940) 32-34.

²⁷ J.Vellian, "The Development of the Baptismal Font in the Syro-Malabar Church," *Studia Liturgica* 24.2 (1994) 147-149.

Christians in Malabar on the eve of Epiphany (*Denba*) feast of January 6 has a custom of ritual bath in any river at night known as *Rakkuli* commemorating the Jordan River baptism of Christ as their baptism. The ponds or pools near to the parish churches of Manarkad and Palayur were the early places of baptism and of washing for the faithful before they enter the church for worship. In the absence of pond or pool near to the church building, they introduced baptistery inside the church, closed to the south (left) end of the sanctuary, with freestanding stone carved round shape font large enough for immersion. Such fonts famous for their size and architect are present even today inside the parish churches of Kaduthuruthy, Kanjoor, Chengannor, Muthalakodam, Muttuchira, Edapilly, Kudamaloor, and Kothamangalam.

The latinization in the sixteenth century made the Malabar fonts smaller fit for baptism of effusion (pouring of water) and shifted its place to the western end corner of the main nave. The traditional and liturgical position of baptisteries with large baptismal fonts is in restoration at present inside the church closer to the sanctuary at its south (left) end.

6. Jewish Types

Jewish practices like ablutions and initiations together with manifold Old Testament prefigurations as the types of

baptism might have influenced the baptisms of John and of Jesus towards the Christian baptism today.²⁸ The Jewish theme of purification or cleansing through bathing or washing is still prevalent in the administration of baptism.

1. Ablutions

Ablutions were the Jewish ceremonial washings of the whole body or hands or feet to make oneself clean removing evilness to do justice (Is 1:16-17). Israelites never prayed without ablution.²⁹ Ablution imagery included also ethical and eschatological aspects of transformation of the people to a new creation. Sprinkling of clean water purified them from their sins of idolatry for the restoration of a new heart with new Spirit (Ez 36:25-27). Therefore, priests in the temple never approached the altar to offer sacrifice without cleansing (Jn 13:4). One who was unclean never did the berakah (blessing). There were hundreds of immersion-pools in Israel for the purpose of ablution to keep up the purity laws.³⁰ Ablutions as the clear proofs for the external, internal, and ritual purity in life might have influenced also the early Christian baptismal rites.

a. External Purity

External purity was necessary for appearing worthy before the Lord and the

²⁸ F.Gavin, *The Jewish Antecedents of the Christian Sacraments* (New York 1969); N.A.Dahl, "The Origin of Baptism", in N.A.Dahl, A.S.Kapelrud (eds.), *Interpretationes ad Vetus Testamentum pertinentes Sigmundo Mowinckel septuagenario messae* (Oslo 1955) 36-52.

²⁹ E.Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 60-82.

³⁰ J.D.Lawrence, *Washing in Water: Trajectories of Ritual Bathing in the Hebrew Bible and the Second Temple Literature* (Atlanta 2006) 155-183, 215-268; E.Netzer, "Ancient Ritual Baths (Miqvaot) in Jericho," in L.I.Levine (ed.), *The Jerusalem Cathedra*, Vol. 2 (Detroit 1982) 106-119.

people. People (Deut 23:11) and priests washed themselves before they enter the camp of sacrifice (Num 19:7). Lepers had to wash themselves as their cure proof of the disease (Lev 14:8; Lev 14:7; 2 King 5:14). Impurities like touching of dead bodies and sexual aberrations required washing to present themselves pure before the people (Num 19:17-20; Tobit 2:4-5; Lev 11: 24, 28, 32, 39-40; 15:1-33).

b. Internal Purity

Internal purity was necessary for a proper disposition before the Lord. Thus they washed themselves as a sign of avoidance of wickedness (Is 1:16) and the attainment of holiness (Ex 19:10 – 11; Ps 51:7). Washing signified the obtaining of purity (Jer 4:14) and the discarding of idolatry (Ez 36:25).

c. Ritual Purity

Ritual purity was necessary to offer sacrifice in the temple. Hence, Aaron the high priest and his children (priests) had to wash themselves before any service in the temple (Ex 40:12). Aaron had to wash his body also before vesting for the sacrifice (Lev 16:4, 24).

2. Initiations³¹

Jewish initiations meant for introducing one to the Jewish tradition were of three types known as proselyte, Essene, and pharisaic rites of admission to different life situations.

a. Proselyte Initiation³²

The gentile converts to Jewish religion known as proselytes (new-borns) and their initiation rite called as proselyte baptism, nullified all other previous relations with any other religion. As a preparation to the initiation, they had to undergo two or three years of religious training. During this period, they learned God's special protection of Israel from the slavery of Egypt (Ex 12). The initiation process included three such rites as circumcision, ritual bath, and sacrificial offering. Circumcision signified repentance (Jer 4:4; Deut 10:16), regeneration (Deut 30:6), and cleansing (Is 52:1; Ez 44:7). Ritual bath provided internal purification. Sacrificial offering confirmed the act of conversion. For the initiation process, the candidate had to stand in water up to the waist and recite by heart the Ten Commandments indicating God's protection to those who keep them and damnation for the abrogators. Then in the presence of two witnesses, the rite of submersion took place.

b. Pharisaic Initiation³³

The Jewish sect known as Pharisees included scribes and lawyers with a certain number of priests.³⁴ They kept up their fidelity to the Law at any cost, and wanted the pagan converts to submit themselves completely to the Jewish practices to make

³¹ M.Kizhakearanjaniyil, *East Syrian Baptismal Theology: A Judeo Christian Synthesis*, OIRSI 225 (Kottayam 2001,) 37-43.

³² Kaplan, Rabbi Aryeh, *The Handbook of Jewish Thought* 1 (Jerusalem 1992) 63-64; J.L.Mckenzie, "Proselyte", *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York 1975) 699-700; C.H.H.Scobie, *John the Baptist* (Philadelphia 1964) 99.

³³ M.Black, *The Scrolls and Christian Origins* (California 1983) 113.

³⁴ J.L.Mckenzie, "Pharisees," *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York 1975) 668-669.

them come under the yoke of Law. Pharisees were very particular in ritual purity. The two stages of initiation to this sect were the scrutiny and a ritual bath. The worthiness of the candidate was well scrutinised before the admission. This followed an unrepeatable ritual bath of purification as the rite of initiation. The convert had to take part of a ritual-purified meal as a confirmation of conversion.

c. Essene Initiation³⁵

Essenes³⁶ or Qumran community³⁷ were the Jewish monks from Jerusalem, migrated in between 250 BCE and 300 CE, to Qumran deserts³⁸ on the western shore of the Dead Sea. The Qumran or Dead Sea scrolls³⁹ of 2/1 BCE discovered in 1947

CE give evidence for the initiation process of becoming an Essene Monk.

They insisted upon the exterior as well as the interior purity of candidates before their initiation. Lustration and immersion were the two purification methods used in this respect. Lustration was a pledge to do justice and truth in life. For this purpose, the candidates had to undergo two or three years of preparation in penance and obedience. The gentile converts had to undergo also circumcision (Gen 17:10-14) and offering of a sacrifice (Lev 2:6-8). The initiation through immersion took place on the day of Pentecost, the covenant day of Yahweh with Israel in commemoration of the annual day of the giving of law to the people.

Resemblance

The above-mentioned Jewish initiation rites have a great resemblance to Christian baptism. The purpose of initiation is the same in both cases.

Jewish Initiation	⇒	Purpose	⇐ Christian Initiation
Training for 2 or 3 years		Preparation	Catechumenism for 2 - 3 or 4 years
Pledge of truth (Lustration Deut 10:16)		Repentance	Pledge of faith (Gal 3:26)
Circumcision (Deut 30:6)		Regeneration	Putting on of a new person (Eph 4:22-24)
Sumbmersion		Purification	Submersion or immersion (Mt 3:5)

³⁵ M.Black, *The Scrolls and Christian Origins*, 91-96; Josephus, *The Jewish Wars* , G.A.Williamson trans. (Aylesburg 1959) 372-373
³⁶ J.L.Mckenzie, "Essenes", *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York 1975) 246, 713-714.
³⁷ A.M.Knibb, *The Qumran Community* (London 1987).
³⁸ Many scholars consider the present Damascus as the former Qumran. See W.Sanfordlasor, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament*, (Michigan 1983) 46.
³⁹ J.L.Mckenzie, "Qumran Scrolls", *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York 1975) 710-716; J.A.Fitzmyer, *A Guide to the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Cambridge 2008.

3. Prefigurations

We can note numerous Old Testament prefigurations of water as parallel to the New Testament symbols of Christian baptism.

a. Water of Creation: First creation took place in the natural water of chaos (Gen 1:2), whereas the second creation takes place in the baptismal water of life. *b. Water of Deluge:* Water of deluge (Gen 7) destroyed evil elements and protected good elements, whereas the baptismal water destroys sins and induces holiness. *c. Red Sea Water:* Red Sea water (Ex 14) destroyed the evil ones and saved the chosen ones, whereas the baptismal water destroys evil powers and generates spiritual powers. *d. Marah Water:* The divine power in Marah water (Ex 15:22-27) turned its bitterness to the sweetness of drinkable water, whereas the divine power in baptismal water turns its bitterness of death to the sweetness of life. *e. Horeb Water:* Horeb rock water (Ex 17:1-7) quenched the physical thirst of the Old Israel, whereas the baptismal water quenches the spiritual thirst of the New Israel (Church). *f. Jordan Water:* Jordan water (2 Kings 5) healed Naaman's leprosy at his bath in it, whereas the baptismal water heals the sins of the baptised at their bath in it. *g. Mount Carmel Water:* Carmel water (1 Kings 18:30-40) purified the sacrificial victim for the immolation, whereas the baptismal water purifies the baptised to born again. *h. Jordan Water:* Jordan water (Josh 3) sanctified the Old

Israel to inherit the Promised Land, whereas the baptismal water sanctifies the New Israel (Church) to inherit heaven. *i. Paschal Lamb's Blood:* Blood of the paschal lamb (Ex 12:2) saved Israel from the destroyer, whereas the baptismal water saves the baptised from Satan.

7. Baptismal Theology

Three types of New Testament baptisms of John, Christ, and Christian show the gradual evolution of the symbolical and theological significance of baptism in salvation economy.⁴⁰

1. John's Baptism⁴¹

John's baptism as the first type of purification in the New Testament, was in a way baptism into Christ in the sense that he baptised with a clear looking forward in expectation of the coming of Messiah and with a distinct reference to the coming of the Spirit also (Mt 3:11). His baptism followed the theme of purification or cleansing of Jewish washings and initiations. As an ascetic (Mk 1:6), his probable connection with Jewish Essene monks might have prompted him to follow their process of lustration (pledge of doing justice and truth) and submersion (Mt 3:16; Mk 1:10; Jn 3:23) in the mode of giving baptism.⁴²

John's baptism differed from the Jewish practice of self-submersion of candidate's own sinking in water and raising from it

⁴⁰ A.Y.Collins, "The Origin of Christian Baptism", *Studia Liturgica* 19.1 (1989) 28-46.

⁴¹ C.H.H.Scobie, *John the Baptist* (Philadelphia 1964); E.Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 83-96.

⁴² J.Gnilka, "Die essnischen Tauchbäder und die Johannestaufe," *Revue de Qumran* 3 (1961) 185-207.

without anybody's help. John's designation as *the Baptist* originated from the mode of his baptism as an administered rite of immersion done by him (Mt 3:11; Mk 1:4, 5, 8; Lk 3:16; Jn 1:26). His dipping of the candidate in water to rise out of it, presumably suggested that no one could effect one's own cleansing by himself or herself.⁴³ Continuing the message of prophets (Is 1:15-17; Ez 36:22-33; Zech 13:1; Ps 51: 7, 10; Mal 3:1ff), John applied the concept of purity to the process of moral transformation and spiritual cleansing for rescuing the people from the wrath of God (Mt 3:7, 10) in order to integrate them to the true posterity of Abraham (Mt 3:8-9). For this purpose he suggested repentance (Mk 1:4; Acts 13:24) and moral uplift (Lk 3:10-14) as the two means of purification.

a. Repentance

John's baptism of water through repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mk 1:4) differed from other existed baptisms due to its eschatological vision rather than a mere ceremonial purification. John's baptism was a call to the people to avoid God's possible coming judgement of damnation upon them (Mt 3:2, Lk 3:16-17). Repentance as a means of purification producing good fruits in life was a requisite to obtain forgiveness (Mt 3:10) from Jesus through the baptism of water and Spirit. It was with this purpose the Baptist prepared the way of the Lord (Mk 1:3), to make the people ready to face worthily Jesus, the Lord of salvation.

The confession of sins in John's baptism (Mk 1:5) and the confession of faith in

Christian baptism (Acts 2:38; Acts 10:48; Acts 19:5) make another difference. John's baptism did not pardon any sin, but implied only a purification of body and soul through right behaviour to become worthy for the forthcoming renewal of Israel by Jesus, the forgiver of sins. Whereas Christian baptism absolves sins and regenerates the children of God through the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; 22:16). In short, John taught the people the way to believe in the One to come (Mk 1:7; Acts 19:4) demanding a total readiness to attain the forth coming transformation effected through water and Spirit by Jesus (Acts 2:38; 22:16) for the formation of New Israel, the Church.

b. Moral Uplift

John's was a baptism of conversion. For this purpose he stressed much on the moral values of sharing, un-exploitation, and non-violence as another means of purification (Lk 3:10-14). For sharing, he asked people with two shirts to share the one with the other who had none. For un-exploitation, he asked publicans to avoid exploitation of taxing more than the rate. Moreover, for non-violence, he asked soldiers to content with their salary avoiding violence in persecuting others. Though his baptism had no any sacramental character, it was greater than all other baptisms existed before him, because he was the greatest prophet ever born from women (Mt 11:9-11) and his baptism was from heaven (Mk 11:30). It was only a preparation for the baptism of Jesus in water and spirit (Jn 3:5).

⁴³ K.Rudolph, *Antike Baptisten: Zu den Überlieferungen über frühjüdische und christliche Taufsekten* (Berlin 1981) 10; S.Légasse, *Naissance du baptême* (Paris 1993) 42-43.

2. Christ's Baptism

Jesus had no need of any baptism (Mt 3:14). Nevertheless, He received it for our sake to become one with us in everything except for sin (Heb 4:15) and to reveal himself to the humanity in different ways as the giver of true baptism in water and Spirit (Mt 3:5; Acts 1:5; 11:16; 19:1-7), and Spirit and fire (Mt 3:11) with manifold effects as follows.

a. Absolver

John the Baptist revealed Jesus as the One who takes away the sins of the world (Jn 1:29). Jesus' capacity to absolve sins was made clear when He confessed our sins (2 Cor 5:21) and received baptism, while the people confessed their own sins and received baptism from John (Mt 3:6). Thus the sinless One became a ransom for many to blot out sins in exchange of His goodness to the humanity (Mk 10:45).

b. One among us

Jordan baptism manifested Jesus as the One among us in everything except for sin (Heb 4:15), who executed the will of the Father to fulfil all the righteousness in Him (Mt 3:15). This made clear that the way to become one with Jesus is to avoid sin and do well to others.

c. Revealer of Trinity

Jesus' baptism revealed the self-revelation of the Holy Trinity. Father in His voice, Son in His presence, and Holy Spirit in His indwelling (Mk 1:9-11) revealed themselves to the world. This unveiling of the great mystery of the Triune God revealed also the everlasting presence of the Father and Spirit

in the Son (Jn 1:33) making Him capable of revealing this mystery to the world.

d. Eschatological Sign

The opening of heaven at Jordan indicated towards the reopening of it at the end of the world as an eschatological reality. The One, who was manifested at Jordan, will be manifested again at His eschatological second coming (Mt 24:27).

e. The Giver of True Baptism

The indwelling of the Spirit on Jesus at Jordan baptism manifested His capability of giving baptism of water and Spirit to others. The one, on whom the spirit descended and remained, was the one to baptise with the Holy Spirit (Jn 1:33). Since it happened with Jesus, He became the giver of true baptism.

f. Servant of the Lord

The disposition of Jesus at Jordan manifested His different dimensions of the servant of the Lord prophesied by Isaiah. His bowing before the Baptist and going under the water indicated Him as the suffering servant (Is 53:7). Father's declaration of the Son as His beloved One indicated His status of the chosen servant (Is 42:1). The indwelling of the Holy Spirit on Him indicated Him as the Spirit given servant (Is 11:2). The opening of heaven at His baptism indicated Him as the liberating servant (Is 61:1-2; Lk 4:18-19). The baptised are the servants of the Lord and the people

g. Father's Intimate Son

Father's approval to the Son as His greatly loved One manifested the Son's in-

timacy with the Father. This helped the Son to begin His public life with much easiness, since it caused great recognition to Him among the people to make His mission a great success.

h. Beginning of Public Life

The period of His public life in between two baptisms of water and of blood (Jn 19:34) was manifested at His Jordan baptism. Jesus revealed it saying, "I have a baptism to be baptised with, and I am constrained until it is accomplished" (Lk 12:50). Baptism of water at Jordan and of blood on the Cross were the two requisites for the success of His Messianic mission, because then only the three witnesses – Spirit, water, blood – could be agreed in one and the same person of Christ (1 Jn 5:6). Christian life also is a life in between two baptisms. The first one starts with the formal baptism of water and Spirit, and the second one ends with the informal baptism of dying with Christ as living martyrs.

i. The Anointed One

The public indwelling of the Spirit on Him was the first public manifestation of Jesus as Christ (*Christos*), the anointed One of God. Peter in his counsel to Cornelius and his friends, distinguished Jesus as "the anointed One of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 10:38). It was a royal anointing for His heavenly enthronement (Heb1:8-9) as King, because kings in Israel were the anointed ones as there was no crowning of kings but the anointing only

(2 Sam 2:4; 1 Kings 19:16). Hence, the king's anointing was equivalent to his crowning (1Sam 10:1; 16: 13). Jesus accepted this title answering, "You have said so" to the Pilot when he asked Jesus, "Are you the king of Jews" (Mt 27:11).⁴⁴ Christians are the anointed ones of Christ through baptism with the mission of kingship to govern life for salvation.

3. Christian Baptism

Christian baptism is the participation in the baptism of Christ through the water and Spirit (Jn 3:5), and the Spirit and fire (Mt 3:11) given for those who believe in Gospel (Mt 28:19). The baptism of water and Spirit declared by Jesus, and the baptism of the Spirit and fire indicated by John the Baptist bring forth the two dimensions of theological significance of Christian baptism.

a. Water and Spirit

Baptism of water and Spirit conferring new birth, demands self-denial, provides illumination, guarantees eternal life, and gives membership in the Church.

1. New Birth

This is a radical change into a new birth where the whole person is transformed into the true image of God with the power of the Holy Spirit. Hence it is a divine gift rather than a human achievement (Titus 3:5; 2Cor 5:17; Rom 6:1-11) to become the children of God. New birth de-

⁴⁴ J. Danielou, *The Bible and Liturgy* (Michigan, 1956) 115

mands a new life in Christ pleasing God to become His beloved ones.

2. Self Denial

Baptismal putting away of the old person and putting on of a new person (Eph 4:22-24) indicate the necessity of self-denial to become a new creation (Mk 10:38). Just as Jesus saved us through His own self-denial as a ransom for many (Mt 20:28; 1Tim 2:6), so also we have to surrender our self to the will of God for attaining salvation.

3. Illumination

The baptismal washing and anointing illumine the soul to the intuition of divine realities. It opens up the internal eyes to know Christ as our Saviour and the Lord, as it was happened to the blind man when he washed his anointed eyes in the Siloam pool (Jn 9:1f). The enlightened ones are those who through the power of the Holy Spirit enjoy heavenly goods (Heb 6:4-5) and recognize Jesus as the light of the world (Jn 8:12).

4. Eternal Life

Holy Spirit present in the baptismal water turns it to the life giving water (Jn 4:13-14; 7:37-39) guaranteeing eternal life to the baptised. Thus, the baptismal water becomes the life giving principle of everlasting life bringing the baptised out of damnation to the salvation.

5. Membership in the Church

At Jordan Jesus started His salvation work of purifying His bride, and on the Cross He completed it by giving birth to her through the water (baptism) and uniting her to Him through the blood (Eucharist) flew from his pierced side (Jn 19:34). Afrahat (d.ca.345)⁴⁵ and Ephrem (306-373)⁴⁶ explain the bride and groom relation of the Church and Christ through the processes of marriage taken place between them during the public life of Jesus. Betrothal took place at Jordan baptism, bridal purification at His public life, and the marriage at the flowing out of water and blood from the pierced side of Jesus on the Cross.

At Jordan Jesus gave whole-heartedly His consent to marry her. Then He started announcing the ways and means of purification to her during His three years of public life. Finally, the marriage took place on the Cross at His self-offering as the bridal-price to possess her. The water and blood flew from His pierced side purified her to become an acceptable Bride to Him. Cleansing through water (baptism) gave birth, and forgiveness through blood (Eucharist) gave union with Him. Thus baptism and Eucharist make the baptised the members of the Church, the mystical body of Christ. Here we see a parallelism between the first and the second Adam. Just as Eve the wife of first Adam was taken from his side, so also Church the bride of Second Adam (Christ) was taken from His side.

⁴⁵ *Demostration 21*; R.Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge 1975)131-142.

⁴⁶ *Hymns on virginity 16.2; Hymns on Fast 4.7; Hymns on Faith 14.16; Hymns on Resurrection 3.1-7.*

b. Spirit and Fire

Baptism of Spirit and fire foretold by the Baptist (Mt 3:11) indicates towards the conferring of the Spirit as fiery tongues at the Pentecost (Act 2:3-4). Pentecost made the Apostles capable of forming the Church through the powers of the Spirit and fire. Baptism and Chrismation give the same powers to the believers.

1. Powers of the Spirit

Holy Spirit provides power to attain eternal life, strength to do miracles, capacity to attain harmony, and ability to grasp divine knowledge.

a. Life

The Syriac term *Ruba* and the Greek term *Pneuma* for the Spirit literally mean breathing as the life giving principle. In baptism, the Spirit breathes divine life into the candidate to give him eternal life. This is the process of divinization of the baptised to the status of saints (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:2) being cleansed from all scars of sin.

b. Miracles

Ruba and *Pneuma* means the powerful wind (tempest) at the Pentecost symbolising strength (Acts 2:2). Baptismal anointing prepares the believers to do wonderful things in life. The Holy Spirit conferred in baptism and in chrismation is spontaneous enough to make the baptised capable of running a good race to keep up the right faith for winning the heavenly crown of justice in a miraculous way (2 Tim 4:7-8)

c. Harmony

In the creation account, the Spirit was the cause of giving order from chaos (Gen 1:2). Holy Spirit brings harmony between the body and soul making the baptised capable of fighting for the kingdom of God in congruity with divine realities. Thus, the Spirit creates a great order in the baptised to lead a life in accordance with divine mandates and moral values fulfilling responsibilities to one and others in order to find out real peace, joy, and satisfaction in this world and the world to come.

d. True Knowledge

Holy Spirit provides the true knowledge of discerning good and evil in different life situations. The intuitions into divine realities are the works of the Holy Spirit to provide wisdom to know and establish truth in life. Holy Spirit guides the baptised in their search for truth providing real freedom of the children of God (Jn 8:32; 2 Cor 3:17; Gal 5:1) in achieving all good things in life (Mt 6:33; 19:28; Mk 10:29-30).

2. Powers of the Fire

The fiery tongues at the Pentecost indicate the fire like powers of illumination, warmth, and purification conferred on the apostles. The baptised obtain all these powers as the gift of the Holy Spirit.

a. Illumination

Just as the fire illumines the way to guide the people, so also the Spirit illumines and guides the baptised in their heavenly pilgrimage (Ps 118:105). Holy Spirit helps one's interior

light to grow, so that it shall become the lamp (Mt 6:22-23) for the baptised to conduct themselves becomingly by putting on the armour of light to cast off the works of darkness (Rom 13:12-13; Eph 6:13-17). Contemplating the face of God, the baptised will shine like the sons of light in heaven (Rev 22:4-5).

b. Warmness

Just as the divine fire provides warmth to the body, so also the Holy Spirit as the divine love provides warmth to the soul creating a new heart (Ez 36:26; Rom 5:5) capable of understanding from within to accept all as equals without any distinction of time, place, or race. This loving cordiality prepares the baptised for a definitive encounter with God (1 Cor 13:12) calling Him *Father* (Rom 8:15) in glorification of Christ (Jn 16:14).

c. Purification

Just as the fire purifies metals from impurities, so also the Spirit purifies the baptised from all iniquities. The principal agent of Christian purification is the Holy Spirit who cleanses soul from all the impurities of flesh, and fills it with divine grace (1 Cor 6:11) to be shined like a new temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19-20). Thus the Holy Spirit as the source of divine holiness animates the baptised from within to make them the children of God and the inheritors of heaven (Rom 8:14-17).

Conclusion

Church has opened a wide horizon to the integration of all to the Christian

community through the formal and informal baptisms as if there is none outside the Church. This does not affect evangelisation as per the command of the Lord to preach the Gospel to the world and to make all the disciples of Christ baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19-20). The different methods of baptism applied in the Church manifest symbolically the zealous preoccupation of maintaining the sense of bathing or washing for attaining spiritual cleansing of body and soul for the pardoning of sins and the forgiveness of debts towards the creation of a new dwelling place of the Holy Spirit as the sanctification of life. Baptismal water as the life-giving water through the power of the Holy Spirit represents symbolically the Jordan water of Christ's baptism, power enough to destroy death and sin for generating life and sanctity to the baptised as the children of God.

Different types of baptismal fonts for submersion or immersion, developed in church history with wonderful motivations of entering into the paschal mysteries of Christ, represent the tomb and womb symbolism signifying the relevance of dying and burying with Christ in order to rise with Him as newborn. This manifests the pastoral dimension of Christian life as a life of sacrifice for others in service, and simultaneously a process of salvation through sanctification.

Jewish types of the rites of ablutions and initiations together with the Old Testament prefigurations on baptism deepen the significance of the rites of baptism as a magnificent fulfilment of everything in the

death and resurrection mysteries of Christ. Christ death destroyed damnation and His resurrection provided salvation. Thus, baptism regenerates a new person transforming him/her to a new state of saintly life with true image of God as *the beloved ones of Christ*.

The New Testament baptisms of John, Christ, and Christians manifest the gradual unfolding of the new age of salvation signifying the kingdom of God at hand for those who are ready to transform themselves through the passage of rebirth with the grace

of God for a heavenly glorious life on earth, since they regain the lost glory in Paradise. The baptised have to keep unblemished the glorious robe received in baptism in the entirety of life until its realisation in *Parousia*. In this regard, the baptismal grace enables each and every one to strive for the eternal bliss that God has prepared for those who love Him, which no eye has seen, nor ear heard, and nor heart enjoyed (1 Cor 2:9). Hence, the Christian challenge is to try for this heavenly reward to be realised at the end of time.



News

Synod Announces Six New Bishops and Two New Dioceses

The XVIII Synod of Bishops of the Syro-Malabar Church concluded with the solemn announcement of six new bishops and two new dioceses to the church. The synod elected and appointed Rev.Dr. Bosco Puthur, Rector of St. Joseph's Pontifical Seminary, Aluva, as the first curial bishop. The bishops approved the election and appointment of Rev.Dr Pauly Kannokadan (Irinjalakuda) and Rev Dr Remegios Inchananiyil (Thamarassery) as bishops James Pazhayattil and Paul Chittilappally retired from the office. Rev. Dr. Raphael Thattil is the new Auxiliary bishop to the Archeparchy of Thrissur. The number of the Syro-Malabar eparchies reached 29 with the erection of the two new eparchies, namely Ramanathapuram and Mandya. Rev Frs Paul Alappattu and Joseph Njaralakkattu are the bishop delegates of the new sees. The Episcopal ordination of Fr Bosco took place on 13th February 2010 at Kakkanadu before an august assembly and the consecration ceremonies of other bishops are expected after the season of lent in the month of April 2010.

Syro-Malamkara Church Consecrates Four New Bishops

The Synod of the Syro-Malamkara Church appointed four new bishops and erected two new eparchies to facilitate the pastoral care of the faithful. The new sees are Pathananthitta in Kerala and Puthur in Karnataka to which the synod appointed Yoohanon Mar Chrysostom and Gevarghese Mar Divanasios as its first prelates by approving their transfer from the eparchies of Marthandom and Bathery respectively. Rev.

Fr. Vincent Kulappuravilai who took the name Vincent Mar paulose is the new bishop of the see of Marthandom. Joseph Mar Thomas, Visitator to North America and Europe, is appointed as the bishop of Bathery. Thomas Mar Anthoniose, formerly Rev. Fr. Valiavilayil Antony is the bishop of the curia. Rev. Fr. Stephan Thottathil with the new name Philipose Mar Stephanos and Rev Fr Samuel Kattukallil with the new name Samuel Mar Ireniose are appointed as the Auxiliary bishops of the Archeparchies of Thiruvalla and Trivandrum respectively. The Episcopal ordination took place on 13th March 2010 in Trivandrum and at present the Syro-Malamkara Church has eight dioceses and 11 bishops.

25th Death Anniversary of Rev Dr Placid J. Podippara

The Syro-Malabar Church and the CMI congregation are setting the background to observe the silver jubilee of Rev Dr Placid's demise happened on 27th April 1985. Fr. Placid, an ecclesiastical luminary, is known as the Father of Modern Syro-Malabar Church. His scholarship, vision, leadership and holiness paved the way for a renewal in the Syro-Malabar Church as a sui iuris church, especially in the light of II Vatican Council. His writings do witness to his in-depth awareness about the ecclesial identity, ecumenical urgency, communion ecclesiology and the liturgical rootedness that are the clarion call of the church in the new millennium. Various programmes are in the offing to spread the Placidian ecclesial vision in the Syro-Malabar Church, that she may witness Christ in the world with a difference according to the Law and Way of Thomas.